

AMERICA'S ROTTEN RUSSIA POLICY—JACOB HEILBRUNN
THE PRESIDENT'S PERMISSIVE PASTORS—JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN
BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S WET FICTION—LEE SIEGEL

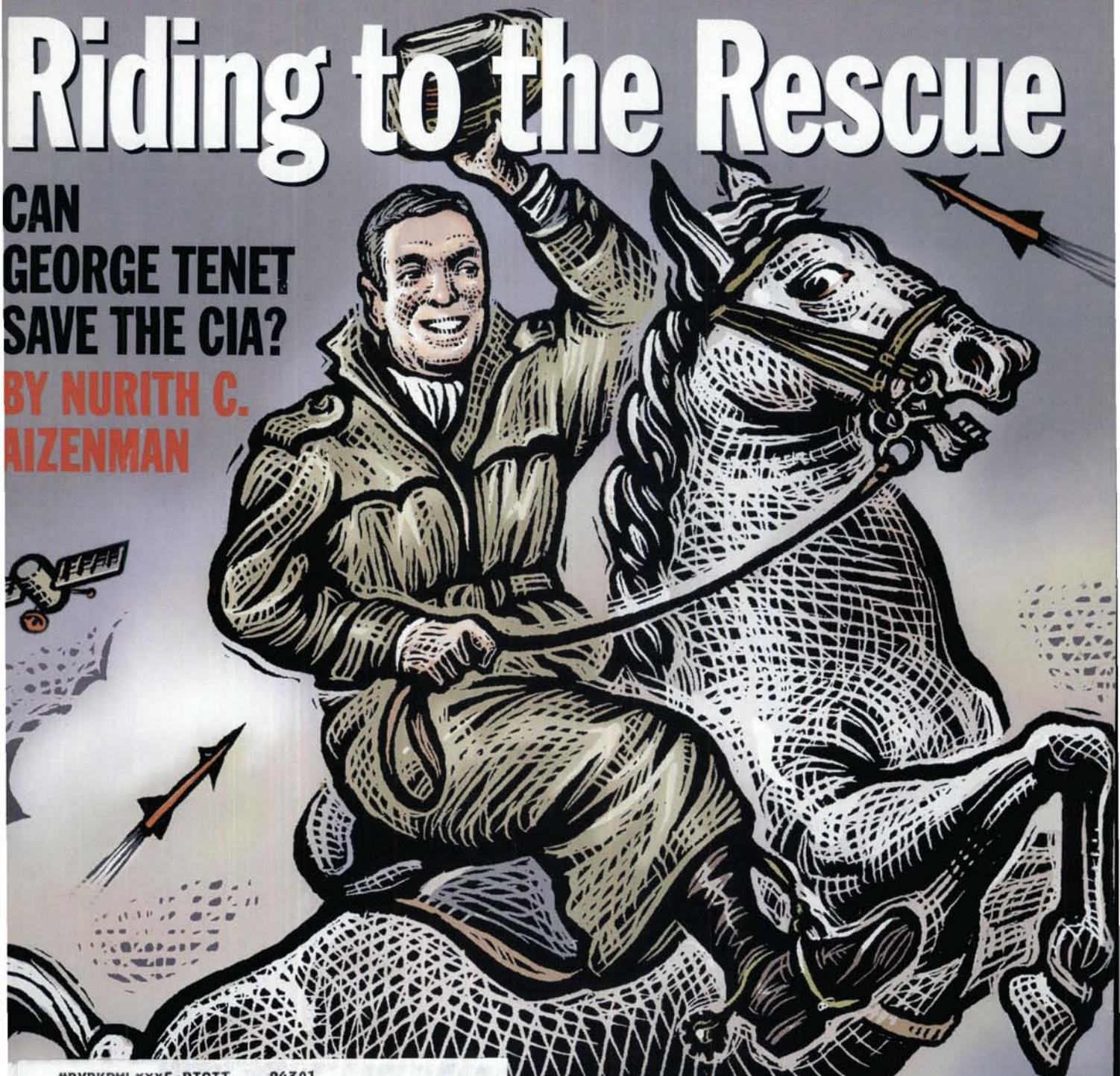
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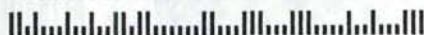
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GEORGE TENET
SAVE THE CIA?

BY NURITH C.
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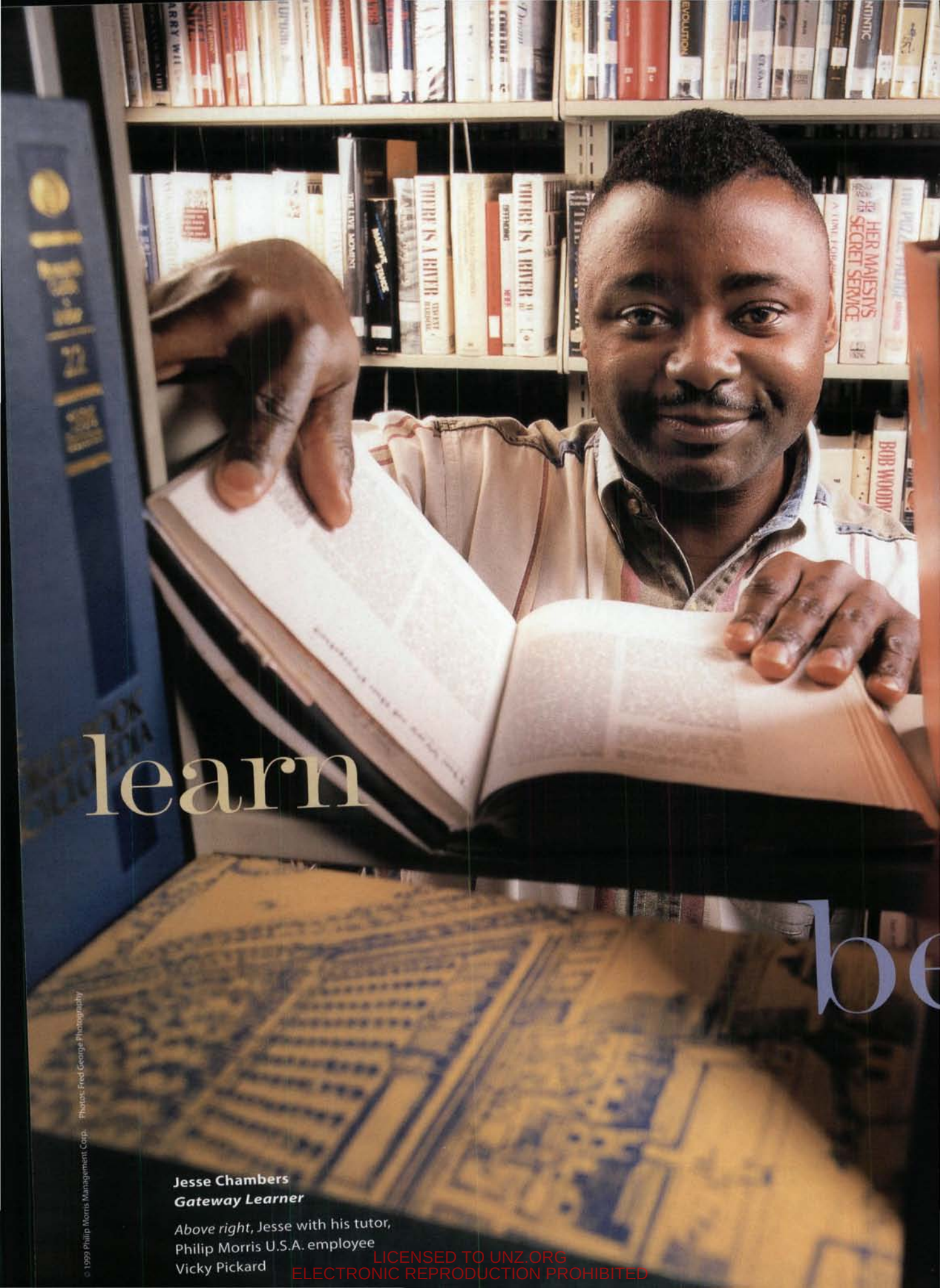
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A photograph of a man with short dark hair and a mustache, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt, sitting in a library. He is holding an open book and looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is filled with bookshelves containing various books. In the foreground, a large, open book with a detailed architectural drawing is visible. The word "learn" is printed in a large, serif font on the left side of the image, and the letters "be" are visible on the right side.

learn

be

Jesse Chambers
Gateway Learner

*Above right, Jesse with his tutor,
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FROM WASHINGTON

Tax Americana

So far, Bill Clinton and the Democrats have been winning the battle of the budget surplus by proposing that the projected windfall should be dedicated to protecting Social Security. "Save Social Security first" is the poll-tested Democratic mantra. It resonates with a prosperous but aging baby-boomer middle class that sees retirement on the horizon and wants to make sure that the program is still there for them when the time comes. Republicans are stunned to find their call to return the budget surplus to the people, in the form of income tax cuts, falling on deaf ears.

Now the Republicans are trying a new

tack. The budget surplus, they note, is a bit of a fiction. For at least the next couple of years, the federal government will continue to run a small but shrinking deficit. But Social Security is taking in more money than it dispenses right now, and, when you count that money, the overall federal budget appears to be in surplus. So, as a way to revive their campaign for a tax cut without appearing oblivious to the need to protect Social Security over the long run, the House Republicans are now floating a compromise. Over the next three years, they would gradually separate Social Security from the rest of the federal budget—with any remaining surplus during that time available for tax cuts (or additional spending). After three years, the entire trust fund would be definitively separated from the budget. It would no longer be a potential source for either new federal spending or new income tax cuts.

This is cute, but I'm not sure the public is ready to buy into a plan that the Democrats can easily characterize as one last unnecessary raid on Social Security. It's also very complicated and wouldn't generate much more than a few dozen billion dollars in income tax relief, most

of which would go to the upper middle class. "We're the party that won a brief round of modest tax relief that most of you never saw!" Some rallying cry.

Why don't the Republicans try something really radical: a cut in the Social Security payroll tax itself? This is a long-overdue reform that leading Democrats (such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan) have discussed, but which their party has always shrunk from embracing. The case against the Social Security payroll tax—FICA on your weekly paycheck—is strong on both equity and efficiency grounds. Social Security taxes, currently charged at a flat rate of 12.4 percent and split evenly between worker and employer, are due on the first dollar of wages you earn. You stop paying when your income hits \$68,400 per year. This is incredibly regressive—lower-income folks see all of their wages

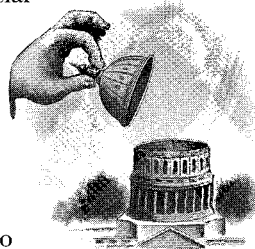
taxed, whereas rich folks must pay taxes on only a portion of their earnings. It also retards wage growth, since economists have shown that employers generally pass along their share of the tax in the form of lower pay.

And FICA is a job killer. On the employer side, the Social Security tax ensures that each additional job that a firm creates will cost it extra money. On the employee side, FICA reduces the amount workers can expect to take home from each paycheck—and thus weakens their incentive to seek a job in the first place. (Remember, the poor don't pay regular income taxes.) To be sure, recent increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit and the minimum wage have mitigated these effects; but such policies are less efficient than a straightforward cut in FICA would have been. Incredible as it may seem, with a lower FICA tax, our current high-employment, rising-wage economy could be performing even better, especially for lower-income workers. This is especially galling when you consider that the average Social Security recipient makes more than many low-wage workers do.

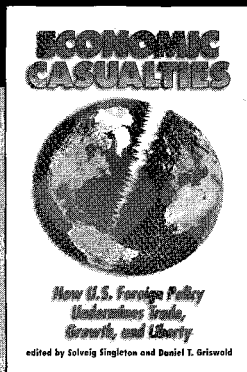
If FICA taxes were cut, the lost revenue could be made up with any number of straightforward changes in Social Security, such as subjecting the wages of state and local government employees to FICA taxes, gradually raising the retirement age, or slicing the cost of living allowances for retirees.

Still, if a general reduction in FICA taxes seems too radical, Michael Kremer of the Brookings Institution has recently proposed a plan to exempt the first \$5,000 earned each year by workers aged

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CORRESPONDENCE

Public interest

To the editors:

Peter Beinart's argument aligning feminism with the Christian right ("Private Matters," February 15) misses two important facts: first, different strands of feminism are diverse, and, second, the personal has always been political. Millions of people have been executed, institutionalized, or shunned for loving the wrong person, from victims of the Spanish Inquisition to the Matthew Shepard.

While Clinton engaged in adulterous sexual acts with one hand, he signed the Defense of Marriage Act with the other. What is new here is not that sexuality is politicized, but that the dominant class of males who create and enforce compulsory heterosexual marriage is being held to the same standards.

Radical feminists do not advocate policing the bedroom, but they do oppose oppressive, gender-based sexual mores. Beinart would benefit from a careful reading of feminist theories before cutting and pasting a few quotes out of context.

ELENIE OPFFER
Boulder, Colorado

To the editors:

A point not taken in Peter Beinart's "Private Matters": With the feminist revolution came the sexual revolution. Women not only got the right to have the same sexual freedom as their male counterparts but were free to shout their orgasms from the rooftops. Indeed, to kiss and tell no longer sullies a woman's reputation—it may enhance it, depending on how powerful the recipient of her favors is. And, since shame is no longer part of our collective psyche, a female involved in top-level sleeping around automatically becomes a celebrity—our current culture's favorite state of being. So why should she not look to make it a public affair? Result: the private becomes public.

HINDA GONCHOR
New York, New York

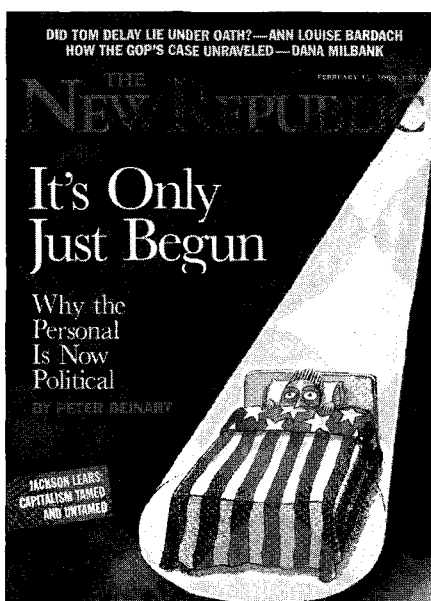
Academic choice

To the editors:

Charlotte Allen's description of Georgetown University's debate over crucifixes in the classroom as a sign of an "identity crisis" in Catholic colleges disturbed me for two reasons ("Cross-

roads," February 15). First, it reduced a complex and extensively debated set of issues down to a tired stereotype of Catholics and their mysterious devotion to religious icons (there go those Papists again!). Second, it represented Georgetown as a paradigmatic example of an American Catholic university, a designation I think the Hoyas themselves would be loath to claim.

Georgetown is, of course, only one of hundreds of American Catholic universities. As a graduate of a Jesuit university fairly secure in its unique role as a Catholic institution in a secular world (Loyola Marymount), I suspect that at very few schools has the ongoing debate about Catholic identity been over the presence of crucifixes in the classroom. Where was the debate when George-



town watered down its theology curriculum requirements? The crucifixes may not be the first sign of Catholic identity at Georgetown to fall; they may be all that is left standing.

JAMES KEANE
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

To the editors:

As a 1992 graduate of the Catholic University of America and a pro-choice activist, I was an active participant in the battle for the "true" Catholic identity of my university. Though a significant majority of the student body supported an open, unfettered, and vibrant discussion of the complex moral issues surrounding abortion, my fellow activists and I were banned from meeting, speaking, or distributing literature on campus by the university administration. A reactionary minority on campus, supported by the Wanderer and other right-wing Catholic organizations, sent a strong message to the administration that the

litmus test for "true" Catholic identity was unquestioning support for the hierarchy's position on abortion.

By making abortion the litmus test for Catholic identity, reactionaries have given plenty of ammunition to those attempting to strip Catholic colleges of their religious and spiritual identity because of legitimate concern for academic freedom. However, Catholic institutions gain their very strength and appeal to students from a commitment to exploring moral and spiritual issues that secular institutions will not address. Charlotte Allen's article ends on an optimistic note concerning the balance struck between the sacred and profane at Georgetown. However, I do not believe the increasingly conservative American hierarchy will continue to allow Catholic universities to work these tensions out within the campus community. I fear that the coming controversies will force Catholic colleges to make the choice between severing all ties with the Church or limiting academic freedom. Neither choice will help American Catholics or our country.

MATTHEW HENNESSY
Hartford, Connecticut

Good games

To the editors:

Rather than abolishing the Olympics, as Jason Zengerle proposes ("Unspecial Olympics," February 15), why not put strict limitations on how frequently a country may host the games? Limiting a given nation to once a generation, instead of the six- or ten-year cycle in the United States, would generate a real feeling of global ownership for the Olympics and diminish the ruinous influx of corporate money that the games attract.

DAVID GARRETT
Brooklyn, New York

Wealthier than thou

To the editors:

Jackson Lears's excellent review of Ron Chernow's book on the life of John D. Rockefeller Sr. fails to mention the full extent of the Rockefeller riches ("The Lobster and the Squid," February 15). At his death, the family controlled more than five percent of American wealth. In comparison, our most famous contemporary monopolist, Bill Gates, owns less than a quarter of one percent of our nation's economy. These disparities highlight the importance of Teddy Roosevelt's antitrust policy and the excesses of the Gilded Age.

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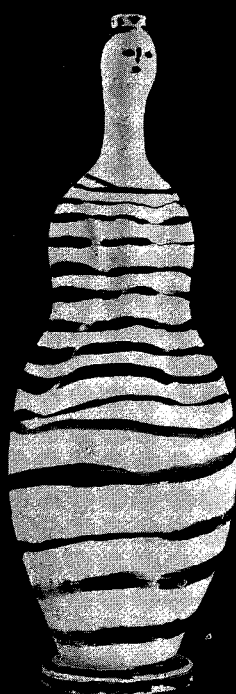
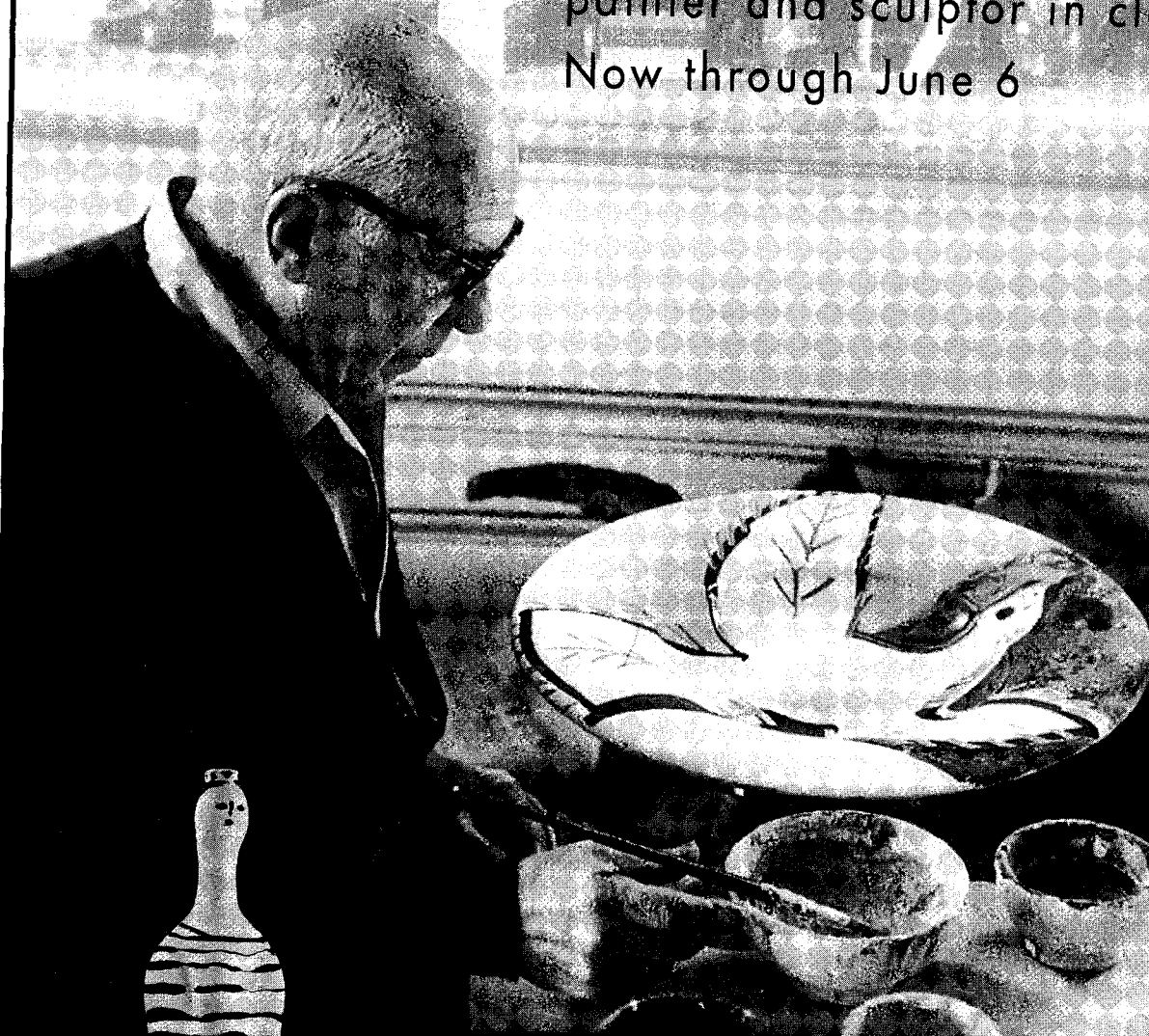
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MARCH 22, 1999

THE NEXT NIGERIA

In August 1979, on a trip through his country's hinterland, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo announced that "Nigeria will become one of the ten leading nations in the world by the end of the century." Seeing Obasanjo's words as symptomatic of a debilitating national self-delusion, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe was moved to respond. "Nigeria is not a great nation," he wrote. "It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give [the] least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is among the most unpleasant places on earth!"

Twenty years later, hardly anyone disagrees. The massive oil wealth that fueled Nigerian bravado in the 1970s has been squandered. The cold war, which encouraged Western governments to indulge Nigeria's pretensions, is over. Given the deterioration of the past two decades, most Nigerians long ago abandoned hopes that their country might lead the world. Many feel lucky that it remains in one piece.

It is tempting, therefore, to downplay the significance of last week's election, an election that brings Matthew Olusegun Aremu Okikiolakan Onaopemipo Obasanjo back to power after two decades. In Nigeria's 40-year history, civilians have governed briefly and poorly—overwhelmed one after another by the ethnic hatred and deep-rooted corruption that define Nigerian politics. It is not obvious why Obasanjo's fate should be any happier. Yes, he returns to office with some advantages: he is from Nigeria's western region but enjoys support in the north, and his years in prison under General Sani Abacha bolstered his democratic credentials. But last week's election was far from clean, and, like past campaigns, it turned on questions not of ideology but of tribal allegiance.

Yet, even given all this, Obasanjo's election was important, and it should spur the United States to action. Nigeria, by simple virtue of its size, is one of the half-dozen countries in the world on which the fate of an entire region rests. The United States has spent much of the past decade applauding economic reforms in places like Ghana and Benin and wincing as places like Liberia and Sierra Leone fell bloodily apart. But all four are minnows. Their fate is forever hitched to that

of Nigeria, which has a population larger than the rest of West Africa combined.

West African economic progress depends, in significant part, on greater ties between neighbors that today trade almost solely with the United States and Europe, and barely at all with one another. Nigeria is the only country that can change that. Likewise, the United States, Britain, and France have made it abundantly clear that they will not send their armies to keep countries like Sierra Leone from descending into barbarism. Either Nigeria will do so, or no one will. The history of the post-colonial world shows that regions fare no better than their largest country. Once Japan and Korea took off economically, they began investing in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

The talk from the Clinton administration these days is about more trade with Africa in return for economic liberalization. That is well and good for the minnows. Nigeria, however, requires a larger, coordinated strategy aimed at building democratic institutions and combating corruption. Nigeria needs an honest judiciary; it needs a clean tax-collection system; it needs an equivalent of the General Accounting Office to keep government money from disappearing. For the United States to help will require that most unpopular of federal programs—foreign aid—channeled through accountable, nongovernmental organizations.

Even with serious American (and European) help, Nigerian democracy might well still crumble. But it's worth spending some money to give it a better shot. For one thing, the dynamics of post-cold-war Africa make it just as likely that democracy would give way to anarchy as to dictatorship. And the collapse of the Nigerian state could destabilize a half-dozen neighbors, triggering a regional meltdown that could dwarf the disasters in Somalia and Liberia.

As Achebe wrote in his response to Obasanjo, "We have lost the twentieth century; are we bent on seeing that our children also lose the twenty-first?" There has been a lot of hand-wringing in recent years over America's refusal to respond forcefully to African crises. Last week's election offers the Clinton administration a chance to do something that might, in the long run, prove more important: respond to an African opportunity. •



NOTEBOOK

AUTHOR, AUTHOR: Who wrote the Bible? For many centuries now, scholars and philosophers have bitterly debated this question. It was answered at last on February 14, when *The New York Times* published this photograph of the book signing, shown at right. The signer is a soberly groomed Steve Forbes, and the scene is a campaign stop in New Hampshire. If believing Christians are offended, we will understand. (Photo by Kirsten Elstner.)

SANTA MONICA: By the time you read this, you will have seen Monica's interview and read excerpts from Monica's book; but we go to press too early in Monica Week, and so we must make do with the leaky consequences of what ABC News angrily referred to as "the illegal and irresponsible actions of some unknown person." Still, we have already concluded from the leaks of Monica Lewinsky's great confession to Barbara Walters that she is telling the truth. Her portrait of the president is supported by everything we know about him: for example, that he is clinically empathetic. "You'd probably find it hard to believe," the wronged little thong-flasher remarks about Clinton's reaction to her suggestion that he wanted her only for sex. "He started to tear up, and he told me that he never wanted me to feel bad and that's not what this relationship was about." Hard to believe? Tearing up is the man's m.o. We are surprised only that he did not bite his (or anybody else's) lip. We are happy to learn that the president is "a good kisser," from which we infer that he is not a great kisser; that in kissing, too, greatness has eluded him. And we note that Monica, also, turns out to be approximately what she appeared to be. When asked about the stunt with the thong, she explained it as "a small, subtle, flirtatious gesture." We wonder how she might have indicated her Oval Office availability unobtusely. The tragicomedy is enhanced by the revelation (this is from her book) that she considered throwing herself out a window of the Ritz-Carlton in the Pentagon City mall when confronted by Ken Starr's prosecutors. "If I killed myself, then there would be no information, and I wouldn't have to deal with the hurt and the trouble I had caused the president." But she wasn't thinking only of dying for her country. She was also calculating the consequences of a jail term. "I would come out an old lady," she worried, "and no one would ever want to marry me"—precisely the sort of thinking that got her into this mess. In any event, it all worked out well. The Constitution of the United States and the marriageability of Monica Lewinsky were both preserved.



LUMBER HIJACK: Charles Hurwitz must be laughing all the way to the bank. Fourteen years after he used junk bonds to purchase the Pacific Lumber Company and 200,000 acres of Northern California real estate for a measly \$900 million, he has finally agreed to let the government pay him \$480 million for just 10,000 of those acres—including the fabled and valuable Headwaters Grove, a 4,500-acre plot of ancient redwoods that environmentalists have pursued like the Holy Grail. The trees—some of them 2,000 years old—are certainly worth saving, but are they worth half a billion dollars? As reported in TNR last year (see "Gold Diggers," by Ryan Lizza, May 4, 1998), a government appraisal valued Headwaters at just \$20 million. The reason: Environmental regulations prohibited development of the land, in order to protect both the forest and the endangered wildlife that called it home. Hurwitz's reaction was to sue the government for the right to chop down the trees—and then to finance an environmental

group that campaigned for the government to purchase Headwaters, lest Pacific Lumber prevail in court and destroy the trees. By the way, it's worth noting that, even if those environmental restrictions weren't in place, the government appraisal estimated that the Headwaters Grove would have been worth only \$250 million. In other words, it seems, Hurwitz made out quite well in the end. But, then, what's a few hundred million dollars between environmental friends—er, foes?

DON'T ASSUME E-MAIL IS ACCURATE: In the Notebook two weeks ago, we poked gentle fun at a new cookbook from the National Organization for Women—a book whose title, *Don't Assume I Cook*, was evidence of the organization's confusion over feminist identity. Well, we were wrong. We got the title from a press release sent via e-mail, and it turns out a key word had disappeared in the transmission. The cookbook's actual title is *Don't Assume I Don't Cook*. Our apologies to NOW, and our thanks to reader Richard Moore, of Garden Grove, California, for pointing out our error.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS:

Satanic pacts linked to suspect in arsons

—*The Indianapolis Star*, February 25, 1999.

Church fires unrelated to Satanism, experts say

—Same paper, same day.

(Thanks to Jim Earnshaw, Kingman, Indiana.) •

WHITE HOUSE WATCH

ONE-ON-ONE GAME

By Dana Milbank

When last we visited the Gore 2000 machine, it was busily convincing prospective Democratic opponents that a challenge to the mighty JugGoreNaut was futile. Alas for the vice president, the strategy worked too well. Yes, it spooked Dick Gephardt, the most serious rival, thus avoiding a primary bloodbath. But it also knocked out the second-tier candidates, whom Gore strategists were counting on to carve up the anti-Gore vote. Senators Bob Kerrey and Paul Wellstone called it quits. Last week, Senator John Kerry folded, saying he didn't want to be a spoiler. That leaves only Bill Bradley, a man who was to have been a sideshow but who now will be a more formidable challenger—if solely because he is the only one left.

The reaction in the vice president's camp? "Ooops," says one Gore strategist.

Gore, as a result, has dropped the invincibility routine. Now he wants to lower expectations by letting everybody know just how vulnerable he is. "For a long time we were pushing how strong we were," says one Gore adviser. "We wanted to thin out the field. We were so successful at that we have to race in the other direction."

Bradley aides, who have taken to mocking Air Force Two as the "State of Inevitability," can hardly contain their glee. "I hear they're backpedaling wildly," one Bradley tactician says. "In December, their line was 'the more the merrier.' Now it's 'we're helped by a two-man race.' The problem with the inevitability strategy is it only works if you're the only candidate."

Last year, Gore aides were hoping that, if their man had to face a primary battle, it would be without Gephardt but with a gaggle of dwarves chasing Gore. Instead, they got only one dwarf, who turns out to be six-foot-five. Gore aides aren't thrilled with a two-man race. "It makes it more precarious," concedes one. "[Bradley's] got all of the 'anything but' crowd." Or, as a top adviser puts it: "If Al Gore were running against five people, he'd get sixty percent and everybody else would get eight. Now he'll get sixty and the other guy will get forty."

The vice president's team worries that, because of high expectations surrounding Gore, every gain by Bradley will be seen as Gore slippage. Bradley can also, as the sole challenger, better publicize Gore's weak-

nesses, particularly campaign finance and his environment-related trouble with business. Bradley aides point to an *Investor's Business Daily* poll of CEOs that gave Bradley a 46.9 percent favorable rating, ahead of Gore's 17.4 percent.

Bradley has already begun denting Gore's armor. On Monday, he secured the endorsements of John and Mary Rauh, two prominent New Hampshire Democrats. He's been to Iowa three times in as many weeks, and he just finished his third trip to New Hampshire. Also this week, Bradley filed his matching-fund qualification papers, an indication that fund-raising is well under way. He'll host a big fund-raiser on Thursday in New Jersey and another one in Chicago on March 10. Bradley, who once talked of doing a shoestring campaign on \$12 million, will now be able to raise the \$25 million he needs, aides say.

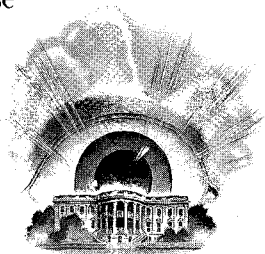
There's still a chance that the Gore-Bradley showdown will be disrupted by a Jesse Jackson candidacy, which would give Gore a short-term boost (by limiting Bradley's running room) but a long-term problem (by diminishing black enthusiasm for Gore). A Jackson bid is unlikely, though, and Gore has already adapted to his two-man-race circumstance. In private meetings, Gore now likes to say, "We'll work like there's an hour left before the polls close and we're behind."

The vice president has been showing a bit of that urgency. After his recent trip to South Africa, he flew 17 hours overnight, stopping to refuel in Brazil, and landing in Miami at 5:30 in the morning so he could attend the last day of the AFL-CIO convention. He spent the day in a series of one-on-one meetings with labor chiefs. And, when Gephardt quit the race, Gore spent a few days calling all the Gephardt supporters he could

find in Iowa and New Hampshire. Among those he's bagged: Jim Demers, Gephardt's top man in New Hampshire, who gave Gore his endorsement at a New Hampshire airport the same day Gephardt dropped out. Also joining Gore is state Representative Jean Wallin, a Gephardt cochair from '88. Demers says Bradley gave him the "full-court press," too, but wasn't convincing. Two Democratic state senators who had favored Gephardt also committed. Gore, meanwhile, begins his "March madness" public fund-raising this week in Nashville and New York.

The vice president, because of the Bradley challenge, will feel pressure to hasten the introduction of campaign themes. "A two-man race changes the equation," a Gore aide says. "We have to engage on policy." Gore, who has been tinkering with a "challenges of the twenty-first century" agenda—livability, internationalism, retraining, and long-term care—will introduce meatier specifics in the fall.

Of course, Bradley's newfound prominence must be kept in context. Gore in '99 is far stronger than, say, George Bush was in '87. A recent CNN/*USA Today* poll put Gore's job approval at 64 percent, and 71 percent thought he represented good moral leadership (versus



20 percent for Clinton). Bradley still doesn't have elected-official endorsements, his aides say. And, because Bradley's ideas are much the same as Gore's, and both of their temperaments mild, there's unlikely to be much bloodletting between the two. The few places where Bradley has tried to show some disagreement with Gore may wind up doing Bradley more harm than good. He has come out against the hugely popular welfare reform and suggested he might replace the Social Security payroll tax, thus requiring a huge tax increase elsewhere.

But, at the moment, Bradley is basking in his underdog status. "People aren't going to vote for you because you have the best campaign manager," a Bradley aide taunts. From where he is now, Bradley can only go up. One February poll, by American Research Group, put Gore at 61 percent in New Hampshire (up 15 points since December) to Bradley's nine percent (up three points). That lead will inevitably erode as those opposed to Gore rally around Bradley.

If there's one bit of good news for Gore in his looming slide, it's that the same thing will happen to George W., who now leads Gore by wide margins. A Fox News poll in February put Bush at 55 percent support to Gore's 34 percent. Already, though, Gore is closing the gap to within the margin of error in various other polls. Asked on NPR last week about the polls showing him lagging Bush, the vice president declared: "I've never put much stock in polls." That was about as honest a declaration as Gary Bauer saying, "I've never put much stock in Jesus." But this much is true: Those who like to turn politics into a horse race will inevitably make the high-flying Gore vulnerable to Bradley. Just as certainly, they will make the high-flying Bush vulnerable to Gore. •

Clinton and Gore's mentor on race.

THE GATEKEEPER

By Jason Zengerle

In April, the Government Printing Office, fresh from the success of its widely read Starr referral, will publish another potential blockbuster: President Clinton's book about race in America. A combination of personal reflections, social science data, and policy prescriptions, the 100- to 200-page book (whose working titles have included *One America* and *Out of Many, One*) will be the capstone to the President's Initiative on Race. "I said to the president," explains Christopher Edley, the Harvard Law professor who has served as a consultant to the race initiative, "I want to

read Bill Clinton's book on race." So Edley—with the help of about 50 other people—is writing it for him.

That Clinton has turned to Chris Edley to "draft" his race book is no surprise. Not only is Edley a prominent black academic—he was the fourth African American in the history of Harvard Law School to get tenure—but he is also a member in good standing of Clinton's inner circle. In 1992 Edley served on Clinton's economic policy transition team, and in 1993 he took a leave from Harvard to work as an associate director in Clinton's Office of Management and Budget. When I asked Edley for a list of people who could tell me about him, he sent back the following names: George Stephanopoulos, Erskine Bowles, Leon Panetta, Alice Rivlin, Henry Cisneros, James Lee Witt, Gene Sperling, Larry Summers, and Bob Rubin. The only person Edley seemed to have left out was Clinton himself—although Stephanopoulos made sure to recommend that I speak to the president for this piece.

It is on race where Edley has been the most influential with the Clinton crowd. Shortly after resigning from his OMB post in 1995, Edley was pressed back into service by Stephanopoulos, who sought Edley's assistance in conducting the administration's review of affirmative action programs. Edley's staunch support of preferences helped shape the review's politically expedient conclusion: "Mend it, don't end it." After the affirmative action review, Edley went to work on the president's race initiative, where his uncharitable view of affirmative action opponents was reflected in the extreme reluctance of the race initiative's advisory board to engage in a dialogue on the issue with conservatives. Now Edley's toiling away on the president's book, lending his own perspective as a black man to what will ultimately be the president's definitive statement about race in America.

And Edley's influence won't end there. Along with the Kennedy School's Elaine Kamarck, Edley is heading up the policy shop for Al Gore's 2000 campaign. Edley's work will influence the campaign on many issues—from Gore's livability agenda to his lifelong learning proposal—but, again, it's on race where his fingerprints are already most visible. One of Edley's first tasks for Gore was helping with the vice president's 1998 Martin Luther King Day speech at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, in which Gore railed against proponents of color-blindness, lapsed into a preacher's cadence, and soaked up the congregation's approval. "He's good at connecting," Edley says of Gore's interactions with black audiences. "One way you can tell is when he loses the draft and he starts working off the energy and he's got a comfort level. And I've seen Gore do that, so he's just fine."

But what's fine for Edley may not necessarily be fine for those who contend that the Democratic Party needs to have a more open debate on affirmative action and related issues. Indeed, while Clinton and Gore say that they want to think outside the box on issues of race—questioning old assumptions and abandoning old dogmas—the man they have most frequently turned to

for help with this task represents the antithesis of this sensibility. With his close ties to the mainstream civil rights community—Edley's father is a former president of the United Negro College Fund, and Edley himself is a former board member of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation—Edley is that community's voice inside the administration, and he is largely responsible for advancing its agenda.

Although Edley pays lip service to finding common ground on issues of race—or, as he charitably puts it, “searching for the kernel of truth” in his opponents’ arguments—he’s unbending in his views and unsympathetic toward those with whom he disagrees. As Edley once wrote in an online forum for *The Atlantic Monthly*, affirmative action opponents are not “soldiers for justice” but instead are “counterrevolutionaries” whose “real goal is to protect the current distribution of privilege and opportunity that has produced white-male elites in virtually every sector.”

For Edley, such rhetoric is likely a hallmark of a career that has been as political as it's been academic. While a student at Harvard Law School, he interrupted his studies to run the situation room for Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign. And, after becoming the law school's first second-generation black graduate (his father, Christopher Edley Sr., had also gone there), Edley went to Washington to work in Carter's domestic policy office and then in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

The Reagan era sent Edley fleeing into academia, but even then he needed his political fix. So he accepted a position on *The Washington Post's* editorial board and commuted back and forth between Cambridge and Washington for more than a year; in 1987 he took a leave from the law school to serve as issues director for Michael Dukakis's ill-fated presidential run. Although he's back teaching at Harvard today, Edley spends roughly four days a week in Washington, finishing up Clinton's race book and working on issues for Gore. “Chris is not an intellectual,” says Glenn C. Loury, the Boston University economist (and TNR contributing editor) who, as a black conservative, has clashed with Edley on race issues. “He's an operative. He's the Democrats' Bill Kristol or something.”

Except that, unlike Kristol, Edley has the ears of the president and the vice president. Consider, for instance, the influence he wielded on the affirmative action review. Edley was the most forceful proponent of race-conscious affirmative action programs. While some Clinton aides felt that affirmative action should become class-based, Edley argued on behalf of the continuing significance of race. When the final report was issued, race-conscious programs received Clinton's endorsement. Similarly, Edley argued that affirmative action was justified on forward-looking diversity grounds, instead of simply as a remedy to past discrimination. This view has also become administration cant.

Most important for a staunch affirmative action

supporter like Edley, the affirmative action review—although promulgating the ostensibly reformist line of “mend it, don't end it”—ultimately produced a strong brief in favor of preferences, which, at the time of the review, were under serious fire from Congress and the courts. Nearly four years after the review was finished, the mending of government affirmative action programs has been largely cosmetic, and affirmative action opponents have been effectively neutralized. “What we managed to do was both establish a principled defense of programs and help transform affirmative action from a political loser into something of a political winner,” boasts Stephanopoulos.

On the race initiative, Edley argued successfully against the creation of an independent, Kerner Commission-type advisory board. Instead, Edley wanted the White House to “own” the advisory board; and it did, ultimately to the board's detriment. “I think we were independent people,” says Tom Kean, the former New Jersey governor who was one of the board's seven members. “But, when we wanted to be independent, the White House would pull us back because they didn't want us to do anything that would embarrass or trouble the president and the vice president.” In the end, the advisory board produced a timid, forgettable report.

Edley also weighed in against engaging conservatives in the board's deliberations. He urged the White House not to invite affirmative action opponent Abigail Thernstrom—whose book *America in Black and White* he had actually called a “crime against humanity”—to an Oval Office meeting between Clinton, Gore, members of the advisory board, and conservative critics of the administration's policies. And, although he ended up losing that battle—Thernstrom was invited—Edley won the war: save for that one meeting, conservatives were essentially frozen out of the race initiative. “It was a good meeting,” Kean recalls. “The problem was there was no follow-up. The sad thing was everybody in that meeting pledged to work with the president on the initiative, they asked to be kept in touch, and to the best of my knowledge none of them was ever contacted again.”

Of course, it's hardly surprising that Edley wouldn't seek their input. Although Edley has little trouble articulating abstract criticisms of affirmative action—before he ultimately shoots them down—he's reluctant to attribute those contrary arguments to actual people. So, when I ask Edley if he can name one affirmative action critic who is arguing in good faith—i.e., one affirmative action critic who isn't seeking to do in black people—he rubs his eyes and falls silent. After a long pause he mentions Richard Kahlenberg—a writer who has argued for class-based affirmative action programs (in TNR, among other places) but who nonetheless wrote a favorable review in *The Washington Monthly* of Edley's pro-race-based affirmative action tome, *Not All Black and White*. After Kahlenberg, though, Edley can't name one. “There's

lots of people out there whose motives I think are suspect," he says.

Black critics of affirmative action fare no better. In Edley's estimation, they have cynically sold out their principles in exchange for publicity. "I could get an enormous amount of print from *The Wall Street Journal* or THE NEW REPUBLIC if I decided to attack affirmative action and repudiate mainstream civil rights positions," he explains. "And I think there's no shortage of people who have been seduced by the glitter." Of course, given Edley's influence with Clinton and Gore, he's not exactly lacking in the glitter department himself. •

TEHRAN  DISPATCH

DISSED DISSENT

By Jay Aslan

A week before the Revolutionary Court arrested him for endangering national security, Hamid Reza Jalaipur was sipping tea in his office at the newspaper *Tous* in downtown Tehran and talking about Israel. "I'm not against a Jewish state," he told me. "This newspaper was founded on the tenets of political and religious pluralism. I'm opposed to Zionism, but I'm also opposed to other isms, including Islamism."

Over the past ten days, *Tous* had run several features and news items on Israel and the Palestinians. A two-parter called "GROUPS ADVOCATING PEACE IN ISRAEL" was a sober history of the Israeli left; it provoked hundreds of letters to the editor. A foreign press item lifted from *The Jerusalem Post* noted that Zahava Ben, an Israeli singer of Moroccan extraction, had canceled a concert in Nablus after reports that Islamic Jihad was planning to assassinate her. Readers I spoke with said they wanted to know more: Who is this woman, and why is our government sponsoring a group that wants to kill her?

But the readers' questions would go unanswered, because a few days later the Revolutionary Court closed down *Tous*, which had been the nation's most widely read daily, and arrested Jalaipur along with three colleagues. Nobody knows which article prompted the action—*Tous* had published quite a few that were critical of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Mohammad Khatami, and the regime's foreign and domestic policies. But everybody knew what it meant: Khatami—who had encouraged openness and dissent after taking office in August 1997—was either unable to protect his constituents from his

own government or he was simply unwilling.

While Jalaipur and his colleagues were settling into Evin prison in Tehran, Khatami's minister of culture and Islamic guidance, Ataollah Mohajerani, was in Damascus—en route to Beirut—for a meeting with top Hezbollah officials. He met the movement's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrollah, who thanked him for his government's continued financial support. "Resistance is the legitimate right of the Lebanese people," Mohajerani said. "The Islamic Republic of Iran holds a steady stance in backing the resistance movement."

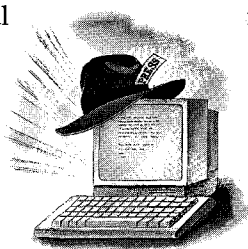
His two-leg trip focused on expanding ties between Iran and Greater Syria. Expressing the importance of pan-Islamic solidarity in the face of threats from Israel, America, and the conspiracies of "global arrogance," he won over an audience of Syrian intellectuals at al-Assad National Library; he also had lengthy talks with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam. In Beirut, he met the chairman of the Supreme Shia Council, Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddin, who had for months been secretly mediating between the Islamic Republic and Egypt.

By the time Mohajerani reached Beirut, pressure was mounting at home for him to comment on the closure of *Tous*. Given the immense power of Iranian Islamist hard-liners—who were threatening to impeach him if he stood up for the newspaper—few expected Mohajerani to offer more than measured sympathy for *Tous* and its staff. But liberals and conservatives alike were surprised at his ringing endorsement of the Revolutionary Court's decision. "If I myself were a member of the press jury," he told the Lebanese daily *as-Safir*, "I would have called for the closure of the paper. . . . It was shameful to read certain articles published against the judiciary chief." He claimed the editors were secretly

functioning as the mouthpiece of the outlawed opposition Freedom Movement, a charge they have since denied. And he noted with disdain that one article had been penned by a friend of the Pahlavis, the family of the former Shah, who had made a trip to "occupied Palestine" with the Shah's wife.

Eventually, the supreme leader released the newspaper's senior staff, freeing them from prison a month after their arrest. "Our greatest mistake," Jalaipur later told the daily *Iran*, "was that we took President Khatami's motto of civil society too seriously."

After 20 years of discord between revolutionary Iran and Arab regimes, Khatami and Khamenei are working together to mend relations with Arab leaders. In the jovial pan-Islamic atmosphere of the Organization of the Islamic Conference—held last June in Tehran—top Iranian officials assured Arab leaders that Iran no longer backs guerrilla organizations targeting their countries. In December, Bahrain welcomed an Iranian ambassador. Starting this month, Saudi Arabia will sponsor a trade fair of 70 Saudi companies in Tehran. Meanwhile, Iraq and Iran have swapped thousands of corpses from the Iran-Iraq War for burial in their



respective homelands. Iraq even permitted 30,716 Iranian religious pilgrims to cross the Iran-Iraq border between August and November.

There is, to be sure, little evidence of a warming of relations between the Palestinian Authority and the Islamic Republic. Although Khatami received Yasir Arafat on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Summit in Durban in early September, the PLO snubbed the clerics in November. Reacting to Khamenei's derision of Arafat as a "traitor and lackey of the Zionists" for signing the Wye accords, Arafat sent a Palestinian Authority minister to Baghdad to meet Mas'ud Rajavi, head of the Mojahedin-e Khalq, a guerrilla group opposed to the Islamic Republic.

Yet Iran has also been escalating its own anti-Israel rhetoric. Khatami received the Sunni Mufti of Lebanon in Tehran in late August. Rising above the sectarian issues that divide Sunnis and Shia, Khatami said: "The Zionist regime is like a pestilence which, after Palestine, has oppressed the soul of the people of Lebanon, particularly the people of the south of this land.... The defense of Lebanon against this danger is not only an Islamic obligation but also a humanitarian obligation, because the Zionist regime is against humanity."

State-owned print media have reduced reportage on human rights abuses and corruption in Arab countries, while increasing coverage of Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians. And 97.7 FM in Tehran—"the Voice of Palestine, the Voice of the Islamic Revolution"—broadcasts pointed coverage in Arabic of Arab-Israeli issues with special attention to the activities of Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad. Amid news, the Koran, and commentary, there is a radio adventure serial about the life of Izzedine al Qassam, the Palestinian guerrilla fighter of the 1930s. In one episode, a wealthy Jew offers to build Qassam the biggest mosque in Palestine if he will stop fighting. "You cursed Jew!" he replies, "we will fight until every last one of you is gone from our land," and chases him out of the house.

Unlike President Khatami, most Iranians do not know enough Arabic to learn much from these programs. But most Iranians who have a short-wave radio listen to the Voice of Israel Persian Service, which has become so popular that last September it drew fire in a Friday sermon by judiciary chief Mohammad Yazdi, who urged worshipers to stop tuning in. This is emblematic: many urban elites do not share their government's views on Israel and Arab states. On the contrary, most Iranians from the business, media, and education communities I met felt that Iran would have more to gain from closer ties with Israel and Turkey than Syria and Egypt. Last year, by conservative estimates, Iran imported \$200 million in Israeli products through third countries. This means that Israelis sold more to Iran last year than to Egypt and Jordan combined.

The sentiments of influential segments of society might not matter, except that, in the last election, 70 percent of Iranians voted for a president who promised a greater role for the people in government decisions.

(Early results from Iran's municipal government elections last week showed candidates associated with Khatami winning by the same margin.) In his address to the U.N. General Assembly in September, Khatami referred to countries in the "underdeveloped world ... at the mercy of rulers who do not even take the trouble of pretending respect for democratic standards or enjoying popular support." Presumably, Khatami sets himself apart from those rulers, because he has taken the trouble to do so. Yet it remains to be seen whether he really wants to live up to that image or whether he even can.

JAY ASLAN is a consultant to the private sector on Middle Eastern markets and affairs.

Is cancer awareness always healthy?

UNKIND CUTS

By Shannon Brownlee

If you can remember the day that President Kennedy was shot and you're a man, chances are you know you should be getting your prostate checked once a year. Billboards in airports exhort men to "get it checked." During Prostate Cancer Awareness Month last September, cancer advocacy groups took out full-page ads in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. George Washington University Hospital, in Washington, D.C., shelled out \$10,000 for radio spots that began by stating the obvious: "Prostate cancer. It's not something men like to think about." The U.S. Postal Service even plans to issue a new stamp in honor of the Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) test.

The logic behind this campaign seems unassailable: Prostate cancer will hit approximately 200,000 American men this year, killing about 40,000, and the PSA test can detect cancer on average eleven years earlier than other methods, including the digital rectal exam. But there is one salient flaw with this argument: there's no reliable evidence that screening men for prostate cancer is actually saving lives—and there is evidence that the treatments to which screening frequently leads may be harming many men unnecessarily.

Used only rarely until the late '80s, the PSA test has become a standard part of an annual medical exam for millions of men. Essentially, doctors draw blood and then test for the presence of a protein the prostate produces. If there's too much of the protein, that suggests the possibility of cancer. Doctors can then perform biopsies to find out if there's a tumor—and, with less accuracy, its extent. Not surprisingly, with the recent increase in testing, the reported incidence of prostate

cancer has shot up, from 100,000 new cases in 1990 to a peak of 317,000 in 1996. That doesn't mean that more men are developing the disease, merely that more of them are getting diagnosed at earlier stages—which, according to many doctors and prostate cancer advocates, is an entirely good thing. Before 1990, says Patrick Walsh, a urologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, "virtually anybody [with prostate cancer] who walked into your office had advanced cancer. Today it's rare to see a man walk in with metastatic disease [cancer that has spread]."

Yet the new awareness also means that more men are undergoing an increasingly common treatment for prostate cancer, radical prostatectomy—total removal of the gland, which sits at the base of the penis. Since 1990, there has been a six-fold increase in the number of radical prostatectomies among Medicare patients. It's a delicate and difficult operation even for the best surgeons, and one that comes at a high cost for many men. In a study of patients at Harvard University hospitals, 88 percent of men undergoing surgery for prostate cancer were impotent a year after their surgery. (Prostate surgery is the reason Bob Dole is now doing television spots for Pfizer, the maker of Viagra.) Other studies have found that one-quarter to one-half of men suffer permanent sexual dysfunction and approximately a third are incontinent.

There are, of course, other treatments for prostate cancer—from radiation to hormone therapy to simply watching and waiting. Yet a diagnosis of cancer is hard to ignore, and, for many men, even a remote possibility that their tumors could kill them is enough to go under the knife. A case in point is Richard Howe, a member of the prostate cancer advocacy group US-TOO. Howe was diagnosed in 1991, at the age of 62. His urologist determined that his tumor was not terribly aggressive and offered a choice between surgery and radiation, which has a lower incidence of side effects. But Howe chose surgery because, he says, "I'm predisposed to thinking surgery is a good idea. A lot of guys feel that you should cut it out as early as possible." A lot of doctors feel the same way. According to a survey in the *American Journal of Medicine*, a majority of primary care physicians and urologists believe that radical prostatectomy offers the greatest chance of a cure.

But here's the catch. While it's doubtless true that cutting out a tumor is the most reliable way to get rid of it, it's not necessarily the case that men who test positive for prostate cancer need their tumors removed in the first place. Prostate cancer grows at varying rates—some tumors spread more quickly than others. In some cases, the cancer is highly aggressive and spreads to bone, causing a quick but painful death. In many cases, however, virtually all men (93 to 96 percent) may live 15 years after their diagnosis, even without surgery or radiation. Among these less aggressive cancers, it is nearly impossible to predict which will prove life-threatening and which will not.

It's possible to see this in a positive light. "I'm pretty sure that some people are having their lives saved by getting tested, getting detected, and getting treated," says Paul Godley, a medical oncologist and epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The problem, says Godley, is that "we don't know which ones they are." Autopsy studies have shown that about a third of men who die in their seventies and eighties from other causes, such as walking in front of a bus, also had a prostate tumor that went entirely undetected. "More men die with prostate cancer than from it," says Timothy Wilt, a urologist at the Minneapolis Veterans Medical Center.

Indeed, there are no convincing studies to show that screening has saved lives. And, while the mortality rate due to prostate cancer indeed dipped 6.3 percent from 1991 to 1995, it's not clear that more screenings (and thus more treatments) deserve the credit. For instance, in Washington state, home to the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and an aggressive screening program, the number of known cases of prostate cancer is sky high. So is the number of radical prostatectomies. In Connecticut, by contrast, screening is used more rarely, and not surprisingly the incidence and rate of treatment are much lower. But the death rate from prostate cancer in both states is roughly 24 per 100,000 men in the general population. (Actually, the mortality rate is slightly higher in Washington.)

The most definitive way to determine if the treatment were working would be a prospective randomized clinical trial—a study that randomly assigned patients to different treatment protocols and then compared their outcomes. One such trial showed no difference among surgery, radiation, and watchful waiting. While that study involved a very small sample of men—and, consequently, is not definitive—more recent studies looking retrospectively at a random sampling of men (which isn't as good as a randomized trial, but it's a lot easier to do) showed mixed results as well. Among those men whose biopsies showed high levels of cancerous cells, radical treatment indeed helped improve survival rates. But, among those men whose biopsies showed low or even moderate levels of cancerous cells, the risk of death was low—meaning that most would have been fine with hormone therapy or just watchful waiting.

Why, then, the big push to get men tested early—and then the big push to treat them with surgery? The answer highlights a fundamental problem in medicine. New technologies and clinical practices can become widely accepted before they are shown to be useful, often at great expense both in patients' quality of life and in dollars. A PSA test is cheap, about \$45. But a 1994 paper published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* argues that the average price of follow-up—such as biopsies, surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation treatment—may cost society as a whole as much as \$729,000 per year of life saved. If PSA testing were universally



Strong stuff

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recommended for all American men between the ages of 50 and 70, the total cost could reach \$27.9 billion.

Of course, this money doesn't simply go down the drain—it pays for treatment, which means it pays for profits and salaries among medical suppliers, hospitals, and doctors. Each year during Prostate Cancer Awareness Month, George Washington University Hospital, like hundreds of other hospitals around the country, offers PSA tests for free. In 1997, according to Lisa Saislin, director of marketing and public relations at G.W. Hospital, 40 men came in for free testing and five became permanent patients of the hospital. Two of them had surgery, which costs about \$15,000 to \$20,000 a pop. The work-up alone after a high PSA test is \$500 to \$1,000. "On the hospital profit side, that's what's in it for us," says Saislin. Urologists also make a tidy living charging an average of \$2,000 per radical prostatectomy. That's not to say that profit has been the principal motive—merely that money helped turn prostate screening and the resulting prostatectomies into a medical juggernaut.

Here's what's needed to fix things: First, better diagnostics, so that doctors can tell the difference between the deadly cancers and benign ones. Second, randomized clinical trials to determine whether screening is saving lives and which treatment is best. (Those trials have already begun.) Finally, and most important, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) could show a little fortitude and make it known that PSA screening is not an entirely unmitigated good for all men.

But that's not likely to happen, because, according to a source at NIH, NCI director Richard Klausner is not interested in another politicized battle like the one that blew up in 1997 over mammography. The National Insti-

tutes of Health, NCI's parent agency, convened a panel of experts charged with drafting guidelines to help women between the ages of 40 and 50 and their doctors decide about getting yearly mammograms. Unfortunately, evidence for the utility of breast cancer screening for women younger than 50 is still being debated, and as a result the panel refused to establish any guidelines. That set some breast cancer groups howling that women deserved an answer. The U.S. Senate, in turn, drafted a resolution demanding that it offer women some clear guidance. The implicit threat was that NIH appropriations would be held hostage. (For an argument supporting mammograms, see "How Safe Are Your Breasts?" by Malcolm Gladwell, *TNR*, October 24, 1994.)

Most combatants in the prostate cancer debate agree the short-term solution is public education. "Most men overestimate their chances of dying, overestimate the effectiveness of treatment, and underestimate the side effects," says Gerald Chodak, a urologist at the University of Chicago. To clue their patients in, he and a few other urologists have begun giving them a form that lays out the potential consequences if a man's PSA test comes back positive. Funny thing: When men know the potential downside of treatment, they are more likely to forego testing. They know that it's hard to ignore a diagnosis of cancer. For men contemplating taking the plunge into the PSA test, Chodak counsels, "If you want to minimize the chance that prostate cancer will harm you, you should get tested. But if you want to avoid unnecessary harm, sit on the sideline."

SHANNON BROWNLEE is a senior writer at *U.S. News & World Report*.

It's time to get real about Russia.

JUST SAY NYET

By Jacob Heilbrunn

In July 1998, Vice President Al Gore and then-Russian Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko met in Moscow to announce an ambitious joint program they called the nuclear cities initiative. The initiative, they explained, would create research jobs for weapons scientists in the ten "closed cities" that constitute Russia's nuclear weapons complex, thus ensuring that the scientists wouldn't work on developing new weapons of mass destruction—for Russia or for rogue nations. Gore was elated. "It is simultaneously visionary and pragmatic," he said, "to join hands in reaching

those objectives."

But, eight months later, those objectives seem as remote as ever. According to a lengthy study released by the General Accounting Office in February, many of the hundreds of Russian nuclear disarmament projects funded by the Department of Energy have gone badly awry. More than half the money has stayed in the United States, some of it has further subsidized scientists working on weapons of mass destruction, and it's not clear how much money scientists have actually received (Russian nuclear institutes use the subsidies to

pay taxes to Moscow). The study concludes: "Some 'dual-use' projects may have unintentionally provided defense-related information—an outcome that could negatively affect U.S. national security interests."

This is not exactly shocking news. Every day seems to bring fresh revelations about how the Russian government has squandered or stolen the billions of dollars that the United States, Europe, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund have pumped into the country—while a few Russian oligarchs get richer and richer. Most recently, the Russian Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov reported that the Russian Central Bank parked \$50 billion in hard currency reserves in a small offshore company called FIMACO. Skuratov resigned his post the next day (medical problems was the explanation); the bank claimed it hid the reserves to protect the money from foreign creditors; and now Nikolai Gonchar, an independent deputy in the Duma, is accusing the Russian Central Bank of having transferred those reserves from the offshore account back into government treasury bills and concealing the profits.

If news of Russian waste, fraud, and abuse has become predictable, so has the Clinton administration's response. Though he's already dealing with his third Russian prime minister, Gore is set to meet with Yevgeny Primakov at the end of March—to continue the work of his special high-level commission begun with then-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to establish cooperation on nuclear and environmental problems. As for the president himself, a national security official says he "has been dogged in a way you can't see on other foreign policy issues. However much bad news there is, he sees Russia as a country politically making a positive contribution."

The administration's reluctance to change policy is not surprising. Policy shifts are always painful—it took several years for the Truman administration to adjust to the Communist threat—and creating a new Russia from the detritus left behind by seven decades of communism was bound to be a daunting task. The payoff looked to be great: turning Russia, a historic foe, into a cooperative partner, thereby ensuring European security and a new market for American goods. Coupled with fears of the selling-off of the Russian nuclear force to terrorists and dictators, the administration could, and did, plausibly argue that it was following the only sensible course. The administration's optimism about where things were headed was captured by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott when he declared in August 1997 that Russia was becoming a "normal, modern state.... It may be on the brink of a breakthrough."

But the Russian financial collapse last August suggests that, however laudable the intentions, the results of Clinton's policy have been disastrous. The Russian breakthrough has turned into a breakdown. Indeed, the American attempt to buy Russian goodwill has boomeranged: it simply associated the United States with a regime that is widely (and correctly) viewed by ordinary Russians as erratic,

authoritarian, and corrupt. This, in turn, has fueled a nationalistic, anti-American backlash. And the Kremlin, desperate to preserve the fiction that Russia is still a "great power" like the United States, pockets American subventions and then seeks to complicate and subvert our foreign policy whenever and wherever it can.

The architect of administration policy has been Strobe Talbott. Just as Talbott's view of the cold war was typified by hand-wringing about America's culpability for frightening the Soviet Union, so he views the U.S. today as needing to allay Russian fears of "encirclement." "Suspensions of each other's motives," said Talbott in 1996, "could prove self-justifying, and pessimistic prophecies about the future of the relationship may be self-fulfilling.... We saw enough of this kind of vicious cycle during the cold war."

To avoid this "cycle," the administration immediately began to arrange loan agreements with the Kremlin. Thus Clinton's first foreign trip as president was to Vancouver in April 1993, where he met with Boris Yeltsin and sealed the U.S.-Russian "new democratic partnership" with a promised \$1.6 billion in aid. As George Washington University Professor Janine R. Wedel shows in *Collision and Collusion*, the administration singled out a group of self-styled reformers known in Russia as the "Chubais clan"—after St. Petersburg politician Anatoly Chubais—and funneled hundreds of millions of dollars through it into the Russian economy. The contacts between these reformers and the Clinton administration could not have been closer. Lawrence Summers, deputy secretary of the U.S. Treasury, worked to help propel them into government—and, through them, to guide Russian economic policy.

The Clinton administration assumed that the Russian reformers were actually interested in reform. But they weren't. What they were interested in was lining their own pockets. The Chubais clique—which Summers had called a "dream team"—turned out to be a nightmare. For example, when Chubais oversaw the sale of Russia's vast factories and firms, Russia's banks were allowed to run the auctions and participate in them—while barring foreigners from bidding altogether. With the field thus rigged, oligarchs like Chernomyrdin were able to snap up the companies at bargain-basement prices. Five percent of Lukoil, Russia's biggest oil company, was sold for \$250 million—just a little more than the minimum reserve bid. Bank Imperil, part of Chernomyrdin's Gazprom, Russia's natural gas monopoly, was the beneficiary. (In 1997, *Izvestia* showed that a think tank established by Chubais had taken a \$3 million interest-free loan from the Stolichny Bank, then placed the money in an investment fund run by one of Chubais's friends. Chubais brazenly responded that "an interest-free loan ... is absolutely normal ... in both Russia and any other democratic country.")

Of course, the Chubais clan was not just duping Russians. They fooled the West, too—as the International Monetary Fund eventually learned. The IMF had been supplying a steady infusion of funds to the Yeltsin government; Russia's outstanding debt to the IMF in 1998

was \$2.8 billion. U.S. pressure helped prompt the IMF to keep lending, problems with the Russian government's behavior notwithstanding. In 1996, for instance, it was clear that the IMF's loans were, in effect, subsidizing the bloody Russian crackdown in Chechnya. IMF Managing Director Michel Camdessus said, "Are we financing Chechnya?... Those who tell me, 'You are financing Chechnya,' in some ways, yes, as we finance Russia." In September 1998, Chubais told the Moscow newspaper *Kommersant* that Russia "conned" the IMF and Western leaders out of a \$20 billion bailout package the previous July by deceiving them about the state of the Russian economy. Had they told the truth, the IMF and other institutions, said Chubais, "would have stopped dealing with us forever."

Warnings have been aired for some time now, as they were in February, at a conference on Russian civil society at the Library of Congress sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. There, Father Georgi Edelshtein, a former Soviet dissident, lamented, "We haven't seen a dollar, not a single kopeck." He added: "When you Americans come ... to distribute aid personally we see it. Otherwise, nothing. Don't you worry, they'll steal it."

But the fundamentals of the administration's policy have not adjusted accordingly. When Yeltsin peremptorily sacked Chernomyrdin, Gore visited Moscow to hail Sergei Kiriyenko, Chernomyrdin's successor. Kiriyenko, Gore said, had "a very impressive understanding of economic reform and what must be done in order to advance reform." But there was no way of knowing whether Kiriyenko would in fact pursue reform—he was a 35-year-old energy minister promoted overnight to prime minister. A few months later, he was sacked. As Dimitri K. Simes cogently observes in the Winter 1998/99 *National Interest*: "The fulsome praise for the new Russian government seemed to reflect the Clinton administration's predisposition to find something positive in almost any move taken by Yeltsin.... The near euphoria in Washington was, however, totally divorced from realities in Russia."

And so it remains. The Republican Congress has tried to put the brakes on aid, but Clinton has called for \$200 million in new assistance this year. In addition, the administration continues to back a \$660 million package for Russia's space program, while World Bank loans—largely funded by American taxpayers—may come to another \$6 billion in the next year and a half. (That's in addition to the \$11.4 billion the bank has already loaned the Russians.) As Gore gears up for the Democratic presidential nomination, he may be challenged on his illusion-filled involvement in the Clinton administration's Russia policy—it was Senator Bill Bradley who in August 1995 decried the administration's assumption that reformers and opponents of reform could be easily identified. "The romantic impulse survived George Bush's defeat to flourish under Bill Clinton," he said.

As if the sheer waste of money were not bad enough, there's another troubling consequence of the Clinton

administration's strategic partnership with Russia—the fact that it's undercutting other elements of U.S. foreign policy. There is an intimate link between the Russian economy and its posture abroad. Put simply, the worse things get at home, the more hostile Russia gets in foreign affairs. The United States has spared no effort to cater to Russian concerns—particularly when it comes to condoning the Russian massacres in Chechnya. NATO expansion was handled with kid gloves, to the point of giving the Russians a representative at NATO. Some will say that Russian assertiveness is a result of NATO expansion, but the issue is dead in Russia. The fact remains that Russia has rewarded American understanding with truculence and challenges to what Primakov has called a "unipolar" American world.

Consider Russia's recent actions in the Middle East. In 1991, Russia was an active supporter of U.S. policy there. It backed the Arab-Israeli peace process as well as sanctions against Libya; during the Persian Gulf crisis, it sent two warships to bolster sanctions against Iraq. Yet, by the mid-'90s, Yeltsin—responding to pressure from the Duma—was reestablishing relations with U.S. foes in the region. First the Russians and Iraqis set up regular visits between their diplomats; then, in 1994, the Russians stepped up arms sales to Iran. A year later, and despite strong U.S. opposition, Russia began selling nuclear technology to Iran.

In 1997, Yeltsin welcomed Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, the Iranian speaker of the parliament, to Russia on an official visit. "We have good, positive cooperation with Iran, which shows a tendency to grow," the Russian president said. The shift in the Russian attitude toward the Middle East was signaled earlier when Yeltsin fired the liberal, pro-Western Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in 1996—and replaced him with Primakov. Primakov visited Tehran in December 1996 to improve relations; in November, Russia had announced that it would sell to Iran \$4 billion in military equipment over the next ten years, though Gore had made efforts to curb the sales.

The Iranians had done their part to court favor with the Russians. Specifically, they had avoided promoting Islamist sentiments in the former Soviet Central Asian republics. But forging an alliance with Iran also appealed to the Russians because it afforded an opportunity to contain American influence in the region. As the newspaper *Segodnea* explained: "NATO's expansion eastward is making Russia look around hurriedly for at least some kind of strategic allies. In this situation, the anti-Western and anti-American regime in Iran would be a natural and very important partner."

What practical implications has Russian support for Iran had? Last July, Tehran successfully conducted the first flight test of the medium-range ballistic missile Shahab-3, which can reach targets up to 1,500 kilometers away. Testifying before the Senate on February 2, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet noted that "expertise and materiel from Russia has continued to assist the Iranian missile ... effort. This assistance is

continuing as we speak, and there is no doubt that it will play a crucial role in Iran's ability to develop more sophisticated and longer-range missiles." Nevertheless, the Clinton administration continues to press its agenda gingerly. As one administration official puts it, "For the past eighteen months, we've moved on the issue to show Russians that they are selling out their national interests" because Iran is a neighbor of Russia and could target it. But "the Russians are now in a stonewalling mode." In an October speech, State Department official Stephen Sestanovich declared: "We have been completely candid with the Russians about our view of Iran, but we have not expected to be able to persuade them to adopt our policy on Iran in particular. We have not really tried to do so. We have tried, instead, to build on a higher realism—on a recognition of the threat that the flow of technology to Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs poses to Russia itself—and to Russian-America cooperation."

Russia's dalliance with Iraq is another case study in our strategic partner acting in a very unpartnerly way. Primakov, a comrade of Saddam Hussein's from the days when Primakov was working for the KGB in the Middle East, has made no secret of his wish to cultivate relations with Iraq. Russia has become Iraq's staunchest backer in the U.N. Security Council; when the United States finally launched a four-day air strike against Iraq in mid-December, Russia's ambassador to the U.N. complained about "gross violations of the rule of law." Yeltsin, from his sickbed, expressed "the most serious concern, a feeling of dismay and deep alarm." But Yeltsin is opposed to the U.S. use of force anywhere: when the United States launched cruise missiles in the Sudan and Afghanistan in retaliation for terrorism, Yeltsin declared, "I am outraged and condemn this."

Russia's behavior has been similarly obstreperous in the Balkans. With regard to the Serb campaign to dominate Kosovo, Foreign Minister Ivanov declared in September that "The use of force, whether by NATO or any other power, will lead to even more serious consequences." The Balkans, said Ivanov, "have always been a zone of special strategic interest for Russia." In October, after diplomat Richard Holbrooke ended his talks in Belgrade by issuing an ultimatum to the Serbs, Russia recalled its ambassador and military representative from NATO. General Leonid Ivashov, head of the chief administration for international military cooperation, said that a NATO bombing would allow Russia to start full-scale military cooperation with Belgrade. In Ivashov's words, "If NATO takes action in Kosovo, Russia will regard it as an act of aggression against Yugoslavia.... The alliance's armed forces have projected a similar scenario to Russia as well; NATO's next targets could be other countries of Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States."

The Kremlin ultimately disavowed Ivashov's remarks, but they point to the hostility that the Russian military establishment feels toward the United States. (In a

scene that echoes the close of *Anna Karenina*, Russian newspapers report that Russian civilians are volunteering to fight on the side of the Serbs.) The premise of administration policy seems to be that the Russians should be involved in the Balkans for two reasons—to play good cop with the Serbs and to pressure the Kosovars to accede to whatever terms are cobbled out in negotiations. An aide to Madeleine Albright says that Albright managed to persuade the Russians to back U.S. policy: during an intermission of the Washington Opera's performance of *La Traviata*, Albright told Foreign Minister Ivanov to back NATO pressure against Milosevic. "We know Milosevic isn't going to move," she said. "We need a threat of force to resolve it peacefully." But Russian acquiescence did not last. In the recent and failed Rambouillet negotiations, Russia was again taking the side of the Serbs.

The standard administration response to criticism of its Russia policy is, What's the alternative? But, while the concerns about antagonizing a nation beset by unrest, on the verge of economic collapse, and with a nuclear capability are legitimate, there is in fact another policy. And that policy must begin with the recognition that Russia is not a second- or even a third-rate power—it's powerless.

For one thing, Russia's economic debility means that it may soon be incapable of fielding a credible nuclear threat. So many of its nuclear submarines have been decommissioned that, according to Barry Renfrew of the Associated Press, only three are thought to be on patrol at any one time. The air force's Bear bombers are more than 40 years old; pilots only get a few hours of flying time a year. Many land-based missiles have outlived their natural life span, and, while new missile plans are under way, Russia is unable to fund them.

Given Russian decrepitude, perhaps the Clinton administration should be less hesitant about standing up to Moscow. When the Russians use the U.N. Security Council to thwart U.S. policy, the United States could threaten to sever assistance packages. In addition, the United States ought to move ahead with research on its own anti-ballistic missile defense program, as President Clinton promised to do in his State of the Union address. The United States will have to renegotiate the ABM Treaty, negotiated with the now defunct Soviet Union, or, if Russia refuses, even consider abrogating it. The threat of a missile launch against Japan by North Korea makes a local theater missile defense system of not inconsiderable importance.

But perhaps the most important step of all would be to recognize that the United States is incapable of propping up the Russian Federation. Primakov himself warned in late February that the Kremlin's control over Russia is "not a solid line" but "a vertical line—broken." (Primakov has suggested that Russia should end the popular election of governors and instead have them report directly to the Kremlin, as was the case during the Soviet era.) During the August 1998 crisis, regional leaders asserted control over trade and tax policy. In

Vladivostok, for example, the Maritime Territory Council of Chief Administrators met to pass price controls on gasoline, detergents, and other items. In Kirov, Governor Vladimir Sergeyenkov sought to reestablish a state monopoly over the alcohol industry. Most of the countries that form the Commonwealth of Independent States are also trying to pull away from Russia—including Ukraine and Kazakhstan, which make up much of Russia's trade with the CIS. A *Kommersant* article observed, "Not only has the Russian crisis driven the national economy to the brink of disaster, it has utterly undermined confidence in Russia as an integrating center and jeopardized the very existence of the CIS in its current form."

Yes, the breakup of the Russian Federation could be the horror scenario that doomsayers predict—massive immigration out of the country, civil war, and the spread of loose nukes. But that outcome is not inevitable. Were devolution to take place—say, a Siberian republic, a St. Petersburg city-state, and so on—Russians might be able to tackle their economic problems at the local level. As it stands, they are heavily penalized by Moscow, which strips them of precious resources and imposes, or seeks to impose, onerous taxes. The provinces have seen little Western aid because it has stayed in Moscow, lining the pockets of American consultants and the various economic clans that have sprung up since 1991.

Certainly, it would be foolhardy for the United States to foment the breakup of Russia. Already, nationalists claim that this is in fact official American policy. But it

would be prudent for the United States to prepare for Russia's dissolution by, say, stepping up aid to the states on its periphery, most notably Ukraine.

In any case, a more turbulent relationship with Russia is unavoidable. Now that the Communists in the Duma are calling for a return to a Soviet-style constitution and the renationalization of businesses in return for permitting Primakov to stay in power, preserving a strategic partnership will be harder than ever. None of the likely contenders for the Russian presidency in 2000, from Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov to Primakov, would take a friendly position toward the United States.

When Gore meets with Primakov in March, he should insist (more forcefully than he did in their November meeting in Malaysia) that Russia undertake real economic reform or get along without more Western money. But taking a tougher line on Russia would fly in the face of what much of the foreign policy establishment still recommends. In *The New York Times* on February 16, for example, Thomas Friedman wrote: "The West right now should focus on organizing forgiveness and a restructuring of Russia's debts, to take the pressure off the Yevgeny Primakov Government, so it can run a credible budget that might begin to draw back some private investment, stop the bleeding, and provide a reasonably stable environment for the December Duma elections." This amounts to the Talbottian formula already applied to the ailing Russian state: give, give, give. But isn't it time to ask what America is getting in return? •

Can George Tenet save the CIA?

INTELLIGENCE TEST

By Nurith C. Aizenman

Like most senior officials in Washington, George Tenet, the 46-year-old director of central intelligence, likes to get to the office at an early hour. But that's where the similarity ends.

"I'll come in and his door will be shut, and he'll be blasting opera music," one of Tenet's subordinates explains. (The director's current favorite is Andrea Bocelli, the blind tenor.) "He'll be in sweatpants, unshaven—which is fine, you know, at seven a.m. So we'll start talking about what's in the papers, and what's in the President's Daily Brief. Then all of a sudden it's time for the eight o'clock meeting, when we go over the previous night's cable traffic. And he'll still be in sweats, unshaven—and that's fine. And then at eight-thirty

there's a much bigger meeting of all the senior staff, and he's still in sweats. And you kinda begin to wonder ... when's he gonna change?"

Tenet, in short, feels pretty comfortable at the CIA. "I love it here. It's the perfect job. They're going to have to blow me out of here," he said in a recent—and rare—interview. (Tenet dislikes publicity and agreed to be quoted in this article only reluctantly.)

The director's desire to stick around is welcome news at an agency that has been in desperate need of stable leadership for nearly a decade. The end of the cold war left the intelligence community stumbling in search of a new mission and new élan. A series of embarrassing episodes—from the discovery of a Russian mole, Aldrich

Ames, to the revelation that the CIA was keeping hundreds of useless and, in some cases, murderous foreign agents on its payroll—led prominent members of Congress to seriously question whether the agency, or at least its covert operations branch, was even worth preserving. Meanwhile, senior- and mid-level officers began leaving in droves, decreasing the total staff size by about one-fifth and creating an internal environment of seemingly permanent upheaval. Nowhere has this been more apparent than at the agency's very top, as a long line of short-lived directors—the last of whom, John Deutch, scarcely concealed his distaste for the job—have paraded through the agency's seventh-floor executive suite. By the time Tenet was sworn in, in July 1997, he was the fifth director of central intelligence in the last six years. And his obvious enthusiasm for the job has already given the agency a major morale boost. As one former officer describes it: "Imagine the CIA as a little snot-nose kid who's walking around getting waved off by passersby as he keeps asking, 'Are you my Daddy?' And the first guy that treats him nice is George Tenet."

But CIA critics—many of them the same mid- and senior-level officers who resigned over the past decade—worry that Tenet may be treating the agency a little *too* nicely. Rescuing the CIA from its many problems will take not just a heartfelt commitment to reviving the agency but a clear determination to radically challenge its internal ethos, which, after so many years of listlessness, has come to resemble the sclerotic Russian bureaucracies the cold war agency spent so many years trying to crack. "Tenet needs to realize that the institution is in desperate straits," says Reuel Marc Gerecht, who served as an officer from 1985 to 1993, and is now a writer who has frequently voiced criticism of the agency. "It doesn't need someone to nurture it, it needs someone to perform radical surgery."

Such an approach would be a departure for Tenet, who has spent the bulk of his career as a Senate Intelligence Committee aide and Clinton White House staffer, followed by a brief stint as Deutch's top aide at the CIA. Whereas his two predecessors, James Woolsey and Deutch, were associated with strong views about foreign policy and the role of intelligence in making it,

Tenet has been more of a behind-the-scenes operator than a visionary.

Nowadays, discussions of the CIA's future inevitably center on its purpose—or lack thereof. Founded in 1947, the agency spent most of its history working almost exclusively on the Soviet threat, and the many manifestations of international communism around the world. Ever since that mandate vanished, the agency has bounced from one small mission to another, from Bosnia to Korea, from drug runners to international terrorists. These days, it seems, the CIA is as likely to be supporting other federal agencies—like the FBI in the case of counterterrorism, or the Drug Enforcement Administration

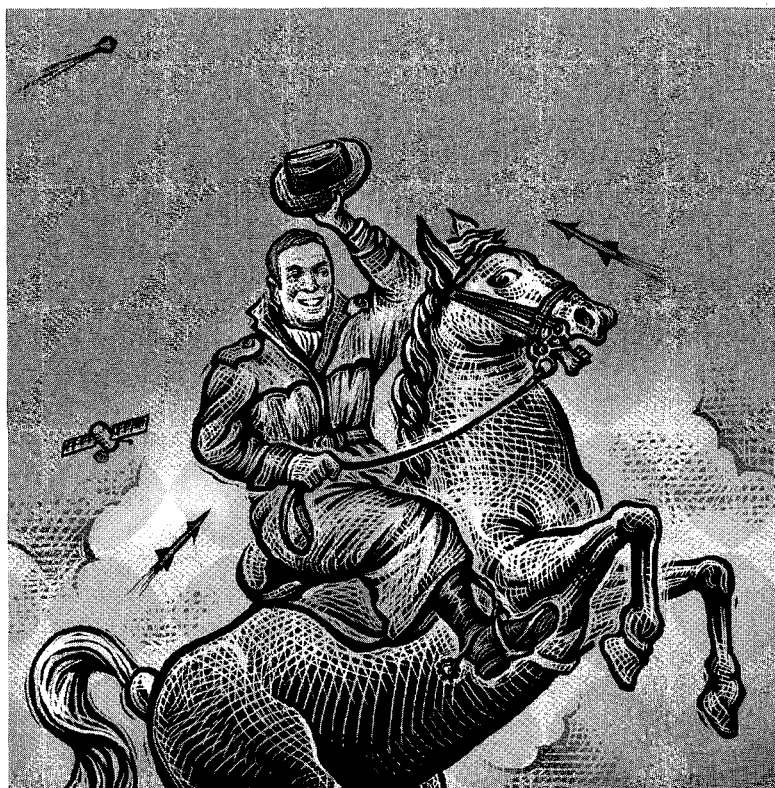
in the case of counter-narcotics—as it is to be out on its own.

Of course, if the agency's current tasks lack the drama or urgency of protecting the United States from a surprise attack by a hostile nuclear superpower, they are nonetheless important. The question, then, is whether the agency has the wherewithal to carry them out, and that is where the CIA's real problems emerge.

Gathering intelligence and conducting covert operations have become particularly difficult now that America's enemies are not part of a Communist monolith, but are myriad and elusive

small groups, or rogue regimes like North Korea or Iraq who keep their borders closed and strictly limit all contact with the United States. During the cold war, by contrast, CIA officials were able to rub shoulders with their KGB counterparts at embassy functions around the world, as each side tried to recruit the other. "In the old days, we used to circle each other like two dogs in heat," recalls a former agency official. "You can't do that with Iraqis or drug dealers or arms proliferators or terrorists."

Meanwhile, intelligence priorities in the post-cold-war world tend to shift rapidly from one hot spot to another. And the explosion of technology and information has unleashed a flood of data to be processed by the CIA's analysts at the same time as it has made policymakers better informed and more discerning and demanding about what they want from the CIA. Yet those same technological innovations have made it



easier for the CIA's potential targets to conceal their activities.

These changes have only exacerbated internal problems the agency faced even during the cold war. Generally speaking, the CIA's work can be divided into two main activities. The Directorate of Operations (D.O.) fields spies and, to a lesser extent, carries out covert operations. The Directorate of Intelligence (D.I.) weaves together the information gathered by the D.O., along with the technical data such as communications intercepts and satellite photos collected by other intelligence agencies, as well as publicly available "open source" material, into a concise analysis that can be presented to policymakers. For years many employees of both these departments have lacked basic expertise in language, culture, and technology needed to carry out their jobs. "During the entire time that I worked on Iran, I never met a single Iran desk chief who could speak Persian, or, dare I mention it, a Near East division chief who could speak Arabic, Persian, or Turkish," recalls Reuel Marc Gerecht.

The problem has not been one of resources but of attitude. Gerecht, after all, was hired in the mid-'80s during a period when then-Director William Casey, with President Reagan's backing, was in the midst of one of the largest hiring binges in CIA history. But Casey's focus on recruitment was not matched by an attention to expertise or cultural background. In an article he wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly* last year, Gerecht (using the pseudonym Edward G. Shirley) described how "[a]t the agency's espionage-training school ('The Farm') at Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, Virginia, instructors regularly told trainees that cultural distinctions did not matter, that an operation was an operation regardless of the target." Gerecht was astonished. "Consider the reverse," he says, "if [a Soviet officer] working on America spoke only Russian you might question his overall competence at getting into the American mind." Things were just as bad at the D.I., where analysts were encouraged to become more broad-based by moving to a different area of expertise every two or three years. Not surprisingly, the problem has only been exacerbated by the hemorrhaging of mid- and senior-level officers over the past decade.

The result, observes an officer who recently left the clandestine branch, is that "a lot of sensitive accounts are being handled by people with no background whatsoever in them." Meanwhile, the budgetary cutbacks of the past decade combined with an explosion of technological innovation in the private sector have rendered much of the intelligence community's technical equipment out-of-date, if not obsolete. "They have really fallen behind," says a congressional staffer who works on intelligence. "Their situation frankly is at a critical point."

These problems help explain recent intelligence failures for which the CIA has been blamed. In May 1998, the agency failed to predict that India would test a nuclear weapon. In August, it was caught unawares by North Korea's test flight of a three-stage missile over

Japan. Earlier that month, it failed to detect plans for the bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—even though it had been involved in tracking the bombings' alleged sponsor, Osama Bin Ladin, for several years. And, most recently, questions have arisen over the agency's contention that a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory that the United States bombed in retaliation was producing VX nerve gas for use by Bin Ladin.

Ironically, given the monumental task before Tenet, the Clinton administration's primary consideration in nominating him was not his ability to reform the CIA but his ability to get himself confirmed by the Senate. The administration's first choice had been Anthony Lake, then Clinton's national security adviser. But, when it became clear that the Republicans were determined to turn his confirmation process into a general hearing on all the failings of the Clinton foreign policy (as well as on a stock deal Lake had participated in), Lake withdrew—opening the way for Tenet, who had been the agency's deputy director for two years but had maintained his warm relations with Congress dating back to his days as a staff member for the Select Committee. Not surprisingly, the committee confirmed his nomination unanimously. (In fact, says Gates, because of his bipartisan ties, Tenet "has the potential to be the first director since Richard Helms [who retired in 1973] to survive a change of party in the White House.")

Soon after taking office, Tenet set about crafting what he's called his "strategic direction" for the agency. His approach, he told agency employees at a speech last May, is "all about focusing on basics." For example, he is working to reform the agency's training and recruitment processes. "At CIA," recounts a senior agency official, the attitude toward training has been "well, what do we do with old Joe, you know he's got a drinking problem or he's just tired—we'll send him to [be in charge of] training. Now we're trying to say, how can we get the *best* people into recruiting and training." CIA officials also say they are working to increase the time available for employees to learn new skills. And they speak of improving their connections to one another through new computer systems, turning to more outside experts for help with analysis, and tapping into emerging technologies through partnerships with the private sector. But at the heart of Tenet's effort is a massive recruitment campaign to replenish the agency's depleted ranks—through which he hopes to hire about 2,000 more employees over the next few years. "We rejected the notion that we could simply, as the cute phrase goes, do more with less," explains Jim Pavitt, associate deputy director for operations, the number two in the D.O.

Of course, doing more with more required increasing the agency's budget, and the Clinton administration was not initially supportive. Since 1991, the overall intelligence community's budget had been steadily declining in real terms, bottoming out at \$26.6 billion in 1997. But last year the agency got an unprecedented boost thanks to Newt Gingrich, who pushed through a supplemental funding package that has increased the over-

all intelligence budget to an estimated \$29 billion. (The actual figure is still classified.)

The bulk of that new money will go to other intelligence agencies that specialize in technological intelligence gathering—which is a lot more expensive than what the CIA does. In fact, the percentage increase to the CIA's budget is in the single digits. But it will make a difference all the same. "Espionage, good or bad," explains Gerecht, "is relatively inexpensive. It doesn't take a lot of money to make [the CIA] flush with cash." The money is being spread throughout the agency, for instance to hire more analysts and to upgrade the agency's technology—just this week the agency announced the opening of a sleek new command post in its counterterrorism center featuring a wall of video monitors and high-tech work stations. But much of it will be used to reinvigorate the D.O. And that is where the story gets controversial.

For one thing, talk of stepping up operations has raised eyebrows among the CIA's traditional critics, who, mindful of some of the agency's past misdeeds, worry that it may once again get involved in illegally toppling other governments or assassinating foreign leaders. These charges, however, don't seem particularly relevant today, in part because Tenet is quite clearly committed to keeping congressional leaders informed about covert operations, and in part because the end of the cold war means there is simply less of a cultural proclivity in the D.O. to conduct such activities anymore. But Tenet's proposed D.O. relaunch is also troubling for another reason: he may be undertaking it without first changing what has proved a far more intractable problem with the agency's culture.

To understand that problem, you must first understand how the D.O. works. The D.O. has always relied heavily on recruiting foreign agents, or "assets," who provide it with everything from secret documents to clandestinely snapped photographs. But sometime in the early '70s—or the '80s, depending on whom you believe—the D.O., concerned that it didn't have enough assets, began using recruitment of foreign informers as a criterion for promotion within the agency. The problem, says Bob Gates, is that "over time, there was so much emphasis on recruiting agents as a way to get ahead in the clandestine service that ... the quality of the information they provided in a lot of cases ended up being secondary. Nobody did that consciously. Nobody said, 'Let's go out and recruit some lousy agents just to bring the numbers up.' But the problem is that, as people went for larger numbers, the unique contribution that a clandestine source could bring to issues took a back seat to simply going out and recruiting somebody."

Within the agency, the system came to be known as the numbers game. And it had another deleterious effect. Because you could not get credit for a recruitment unless your source actually signed the dotted line and agreed to go on the CIA's payroll, agents frequently tried to formalize relationships that were best left infor-

mal. One former D.O. officer explains it this way: "Let's say you get to know [a foreign official] because you were the consular officer and you helped him with some things. To show you what a good friend he is, he starts telling you things he shouldn't be—and it's great stuff. ... Even if the intelligence he's producing is considered to be accurate the pressure is to recruit him. ... There has to be a Rubicon crossed, you have to get a recruitment." But this, says the officer, can potentially ruin the relationship. "It's demeaning to say to somebody, 'You're a traitor, you work for me now.'" The foreigner may balk, or he may agree to sign on only as long as you are there—vowing to sever all ties to the CIA as soon as you leave.

Another corollary of the numbers game was that very little reward was given for handling agents recruited by others. And this, say former agency officers, is often a far more crucial task. "You are basically re-recruiting the agent, and some people make assets far more productive, for instance by directing them to meet with other people in their government," observes the former D.O. officer. "But," he adds, "that's the kind of thing nobody gets credit for."

By the late '80s and early '90s, the numbers game had become too pervasive for the agency's upper management to ignore. In 1994, James Woolsey put in place a new system to assess the value of foreign assets. But it did not really kick into full gear until 1995, when a Guatemalan military official on the CIA payroll was implicated in the cover-up of a murder of an American citizen. That prompted then-Director John Deutch to order a comprehensive review of all foreign assets. Deutch called it "the scrub," and its results were shocking. According to *The New York Times*, the CIA had to drop as many as 1,000 agents—between a fourth and a third of those on the payroll—because the information they were providing was of insufficient value. In addition, the agency let go about 100 agents—half of them from Latin America—because the information they provided was not valuable enough to justify the fact that they were also murderers, torturers, or other types of criminals.

In response to that last discovery, Deutch ordered an internal investigation into the CIA's activities in Guatemala; based on its results, he fired a former chief of the Latin America division and a former Guatemalan station chief. It did not prove a popular move. When Deutch announced the firings in a speech to agency employees, some of the older officers actually mocked Deutch to his face. The irony, however, is that for all the resentment Deutch generated in that case, virtually no one else was held to account for perpetuating the system that had necessitated the scrub in the first place.

This, say the CIA's critics, means that the numbers game is likely to continue. "The senior guys in the D.O. are the ones who got up through the [numbers game] system," says a former D.O. officer. "Their view is, if it's good enough for me, it's good enough for anyone else." Gerecht agrees. "A fundamental first step [of reform] is you have to fire people," he says, "to eliminate that

cadre that has benefited from a system that produces usually mediocre if not awful intelligence." And since Tenet has not done that, his plan to expand the D.O. could backfire. "Tenet has probably done the worst thing possible for the clandestine service: he's thrown millions and millions of dollars at it," says Gerecht. "The only real vehicle for changing the D.O. was the financial leverage Congress had over the institution, and that leverage is now gone—a very bad situation is getting worse."

Tenet, for his part, disputes the notion that the numbers game is still a problem. "That's so out of date it's not even funny," he says. Today, he explains, promotion panels consider not just how many assets an officer has recruited, but how difficult they were to recruit. Furthermore, says a senior D.O. official, "we are now speaking to competencies. I am less concerned about anything that could smack of numbers. I am far more concerned about an officer having certain competencies before he or she advances to certain levels." This officer also disputes the degree to which the numbers game was ever really a problem. "You do not get belly to belly with the bad guy and convince that person to commit espionage against his or her country without having had some experience against an easier target.... So some of the [emphasis] on quantity was there in a training sense."

It is hard to determine the degree to which things have really changed because the CIA has never made its criteria for evaluating the performance of its officers and informants public. Tenet's response is to argue that, given the nature of its work, the CIA simply cannot throw open its rules and regulations to public scrutiny: "This is an espionage organization, this isn't Gimbel's!" And, he adds, setting out on a mass firing spree to punish people for past misdeeds is not the answer, either. ("I'm focused on the future," he says.) Instead, he has consistently maintained that the solution is to establish clear values and ensure that agency employees follow them.

In a sense, this is Tenet's strongest argument. For, as Jeffrey Smith, general counsel at the CIA in 1995 and 1996, puts it, "You can change the criteria for promoting people, but [what you really need] is for the people administering it to follow." What makes the difference, he says, "is the leadership of the people at the top." And Tenet, argues Smith, is not only a person of integrity himself, "but has sought out other people who are similarly imbued with the importance of integrity." Among those people is Jack Downing, a respected veteran clandestine officer who Tenet brought out of retirement to head up the D.O. "I don't think there'll be any funny business on Downing's watch," notes Frederick Hitz, who was inspector general at the agency from 1990 to 1997. Finally, they say Tenet is not shy about taking a stand when necessary. "George has spine," says Woolsey. And adds Smith: "He is tough in the positive sense, when he needs to be firm and decisive." As proof, many point to an incident reported in *The New York Times*, in which Tenet reportedly told President Clinton that he

would resign if Clinton acceded to an apparent Israeli request to release the Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard from prison in exchange for Israel's agreement to last October's Wye accords.

But Tenet's critics worry that he may not be quite as inclined to get tough with the D.O. "The fear," says one former officer, "is that Tenet wants to be one of the boys." Certainly, Tenet's rapport with the officers of the D.O. has been clear from the start. In part it's a function of his personality. He is unconventional, showing up to meetings with the other foreign policy principals, such as Madeleine Albright and Sandy Berger, wearing dark Ray-Ban sunglasses, jeans, and a black leather jacket emblazoned with the CIA insignia. He is passionate, a man who his staff says "cares deeply about issues" and who gets emotional when delivering speeches honoring CIA officers who were killed in the line of duty. He is unpretentious, eschewing a limousine in favor of a Ford Explorer and often stopping his convoy at a McDonald's drive-in for lunch on the way to a briefing at the White House. He is informal—the kind of guy who throws an employee in a headlock when he passes him in the hall, then drags him into the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. In short, says Smith, "George fits in very well with the action-oriented culture of the D.O."

Tenet's warm relationship with the D.O. officers is also part of a conscious management philosophy. "There are enormously talented people here," he says, "and I want them to feel that the people that lead them care deeply about them." And he makes a point of doing so. "George does all the little things," says Hitz. "He calls people up when they've done a good job." And, during his frequent visits to the main cafeteria, says Kenneth Levit, special counsel to Tenet, he takes time to "say hello to everybody from the person who he's got a relationship with to the person who's cashing him out." Even Tenet's wife, Stephanie, contributes to the effort—meeting with the families of officers when she accompanies Tenet on trips abroad and relaying back their concerns to headquarters.

The result is that, even though as deputy director he worked closely with John Deutch (the partnership, says Deutch, "was more of a marriage than a business relationship. I did not move without consulting George"), he did not inherit Deutch's contentious relations with the rank and file. "Tenet was always at the cutting edge of the [reformist] school, but he did it in a way that the intelligence community didn't try to mutilate him," says Leslie Gelb, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a longtime friend of Tenet's. To the contrary, after Tenet gave a speech to the staff just a month before being confirmed, one senior officer sent him a note reading: "It's been a long time since I saw the men and women of this organization stand up and applaud a director of central intelligence."

Tenet argues that maintaining this support among the CIA's employees is crucial: "If they don't believe that you believe in them and the mission, you can articulate

all the strategy you want—you can't do it by yourself, they have to implement it." And this, ultimately, is the point on which his critics most fundamentally disagree with him. To really change things, argues Gerecht, "you have to walk in with a very distrustful attitude toward the D.O.'s management. . . . He's going to have to alienate if not go to war with senior management inside the service." And former officers point to Tenet's failure to get rid of one division chief who they maintain is widely known to suppress dissent among his staff as proof that Tenet is unwilling to do what is necessary. Whether or not that particular example is fair, the fact is that ensuring that the old numbers game culture does not once again rear its head will require Tenet's constant vigilance. "It's the kind of thing that has to be reemphasized again and again," says former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates, "because bureaucratic inertia will point you back in the other direction if somebody isn't constantly focused on the issue." And even one of Tenet's most avid fans privately worries that, in his rush to revamp the D.O., Tenet may ignore this problem.

It will, of course, be years before anybody knows how Tenet's plans for the D.O. pan out. But it's already possible to observe and evaluate another, quieter revolution Tenet has helped along: gaining the agency entry into the Clinton administration's foreign policy club. It was, after all, only four years ago that Clinton's first director, James Woolsey, resigned in frustration because, he says, he was getting almost no access to the president. ("When that little airplane crashed on the White House lawn in 1994," Woolsey recalls, "the joke around town was that it must be me trying to get an audience.") Tenet, in contrast, is a key member of the Clinton foreign policy team, speaking with Sandy Berger throughout the day and enjoying a warm relationship with Defense Secretary William Cohen. This is at least in part a testament to Tenet's can-do attitude. As one senior agency official characterizes it, "The CIA is the 911; you do what you are asked to do." But while this approach has certainly ensured that the agency will remain relevant, it has also engendered nearly as much controversy as Tenet's plan to build up the D.O. The worry is that, in his effort to make the CIA useful, Tenet may lead it into missions that endanger the very effectiveness and objectivity that make it valuable in the first place. Nowhere has this concern been more apparent than in the debate that erupted over the CIA's role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as outlined in last October's Wye memorandum.

Without explicitly referring to the CIA by name, the memorandum calls for the agency's representatives to serve on several committees charged with either receiving reports from the Palestinian Authority about its efforts to combat terrorism, or facilitating security cooperation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Tenet played an integral part in drafting these specifics—going well beyond the role of technical adviser. "These were not diplomatic conversations," says an official who

accompanied Tenet at Wye. "He would say something like—I'm paraphrasing—'Well, in their view your position is complete bullshit and let me tell you why.' It was a very up-front approach."

And it worked. According to CIA officials, Tenet managed to wrap up nearly all the issues in his brief by the third day of the nine-day conference. The State Department was impressed. "He would come back to report to Dennis Ross . . . and the response would always be, 'Well, why don't you go over to cabin number four because they're having a hell of a time on this other issue, and you could be really helpful there,'" says the CIA official. Tenet, he says, always refused, saying, "No that's not intelligence, that's not security issues, that's not terrorism, that's for you guys to work out." He was always drawing those lines." Nevertheless, the fact that he felt the need to do so merely underscores how close to the line Tenet was operating.

As for the CIA role outlined in the accords themselves, CIA officials point out that in many respects it simply represents the formalization of what the agency had already been doing. After all, ever since the Israelis and Palestinians signed the Oslo peace accords back in 1993, the CIA has been intermittently arranging meetings between the security forces of both sides as part of what former Near East Division Chief Frank Anderson has called "low-intensity statecraft." The CIA even set up an officer in Tel Aviv to handle the process. However, former agency officials express concern that by so publicly involving the agency in monitoring, the Wye role may only poison its relations with both sides. When the two sides disagree with each other in a trilateral meeting refereed by the agency, "you can't be totally neutral, no matter how hard you try," says one former D.O. official. In short, the CIA may end up losing the very trust that led both sides to choose it for this role in the first place.

This is also a problem because, according to several former officers, the CIA receives a large measure of its intelligence on the situation in Israel and the occupied territories through its liaison relationships with Israeli and Palestinian intelligence services as opposed to other means of intelligence gathering. Another concern is that, as a result of its more public role, the CIA will be under even more pressure than usual to conform its assessments of whether the two sides are living up to the agreement to the policy needs of the State Department. And finally there is the worry that, even if the CIA manages to avoid all those other pitfalls, dependence on the agency as an intermediary will prevent the Israelis and Palestinians from forming their own permanent bilateral cooperation—turning what was intended to be a short-term role for the CIA into a long-term one.

Tenet has been adamant in dismissing all of these dangers. But the truth is that avoiding them will require his constant attention. The same is true if he is to prevent the numbers game culture from sabotaging his effort to expand the D.O. The irony, then, is that the very actions Tenet is taking to revive his agency could carry major risks. It's a good thing that Tenet likes his task so much, because it is hardly an enviable one. •

BOOKS & The Arts

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Two for the Road

How did he do it? The question persists after *The Dreamlife of Angels* (Sony Pictures Classics). Not one story element is fresh, the theme is familiar in any purview of modern society, yet this French film is completely absorbing, almost rudely poignant. How did the director, Erick Zonca, do it? The answer is both simple and deep. He paid no attention to predecessors or echoes: he just wanted, overwhelmingly, to make this film. If he worried about familiarity at all, he clearly felt that his conviction would overwhelm reminders of other films. He was right.

This is Zonca's first feature film—he had made three shorts—yet he wasn't exactly a stripling in 1997 when he wrote it (with Roger Bohbot) and directed it. Born in Orléans in 1956, he went to Paris when he was sixteen to study acting and at twenty moved on to New York to continue acting studies. He didn't enter the film world until he returned to France when he was thirty. He found success with his short films, which is to say he won awards, so he was enabled to make a feature.

The story consists of events, not a plot. Isa is twenty years old, on the road, rucksack on her back, traveling because she doesn't want to melt into conventional life. She arrives in Lille, is offered a sewing job on a machine in an assembly line, and accepts it to raise some cash. She is soon fired for inefficiency, but meets a local girl, Marie, who has much the same alienation from burrow life. Marie is apartment-sitting for a woman and her daughter who were gravely injured in a car crash, and she permits Isa

to stay with her.

They apply for waitress work but are offered only sandwich-board jobs. Isa accepts. Two men happen along, bouncers at a club, and they all become friends. Marie sleeps with her gent. Then she meets Chriss, a rich young man who owns a couple of clubs, and she really falls for him, responding warmly to his skilled seducings.

Meanwhile, Isa has been reading the diaries in the apartment of the girl who lives there and who is comatose in the hospital. (The girl's mother has died by now.) Isa is fascinated, is drawn to the girl, visits her often. Though the girl is quite unconscious, Isa has a sense, because of the diaries, of connection with her. The odd overtone suggested is that the inert girl has achieved a state that Isa almost envies: to be in the world but safe from it.

Marie's affair with Chriss heats up—for both of them, she thinks, but she is wrong. The results are dire. At the end Isa doesn't hit the road again with her rucksack: she takes a job somewhere else much like the one from which she was

fired at the start.

If there is a cellophane-wrapped moral in the film, probably it's that the world is too much with us, late and soon, but that in trying *not* to get and spend, we can lay waste our powers. Still, though this is hinted, the film doesn't stay within that theme's boundaries. It's simply about two young women and some things that happen to them. The real vitality of the film, beneath any adage, is that Zonca cares greatly about Isa and Marie. He worries about them, almost frets about them, chuckles at them, consoles them, is sometimes grieved by them. He is so involved with them that the film allows not a millimeter in which we can doubt that they exist.

Zonca is tremendously justified by Elodie Bouchez (Isa) and Natacha Regnier (Marie), both of whom have previously appeared in films but who have life faces, not film faces. (Minnie Driver as against Michelle Pfeiffer, let's say.) Zonca states that his experience as an actor helped him in his work with Bouchez and Regnier, and they have quite evidently benefited from him. The film exudes an intimacy with the lives of women that such a director as Chantal Akerman evokes in her work. Or that Alain Tanner captured in *La Salamandre*, another account of a young woman's struggle against drowning in the humdrum.

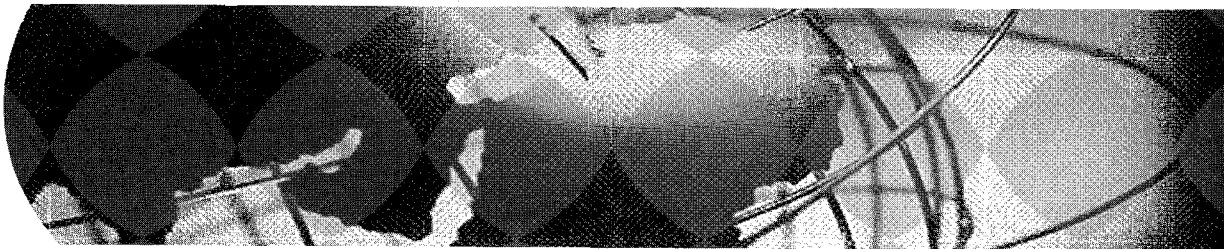
And, to cite one more reference, the very last sequence is a reminder of *Il Posto*. At the end of Ermanno Olmi's agon of a young man being ground into job-burger, rows of men at their desks are drizzling their lives away at grubby routines. At the end of Zonca's film, the camera moves along from Isa's bench in her new job to the faces of other young women stitching away like her. Are we to infer that Isa is either defeated or "adjusted" like her co-workers here? Well, society needs goods and these women need jobs; still, we're allowed to suspect that the world and the human race were not created in order to put these young lives at these machines.

Lastly, the film's title. We see neither dreamlife nor angels; yet it seems reductive to read the title as merely ironic. There is much more in the picture than

FILMS WORTH SEEING

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the obvious fact that the young women are not angels. Perhaps the title suggests that human beings are burdened with dissatisfactions, often inchoate, and that this fact is our best virtue. In any case, whatever the title means, we can all hope that Zonca is thinking of other characters for whom he cares as passionately as he does for Isa and Marie.

Coincidence. There's another young woman on the road with a rucksack in *Among Giants* (Fox Searchlight), but she moves through a much lesser film. This time she's Australian and is hiking through Britain. In Yorkshire, she encounters a trite plot, unleavened by Zonca-like intensity, then plods on.

The screenplay is by Simon Beaufoy, who wrote *The Full Monty*, a picture that

amused many except me. The young woman is played by Rachel Griffiths, so appealing as the first-named in *Hilary and Jackie*, but burdened here with a movie-script role. The hiker gets a job with a crew that is painting high electrical towers across the countryside. The foreman is played by Pete Postlethwaite, Mr. Cheekbones, who was so strong in *Brassed Off* and *In the Name of the Father* and who here has to spend his time trying to breathe life into a part that is all retread. Eventually Griffiths and Postlethwaite get together. But there is also a dashing young man in the crew. Nuff sed.

Much of the film was shot a hundred feet up on the towers. The film exists to exploit this novelty. The aerial shooting must have been difficult; but it really wasn't worth the trouble. •

hour, or her crazy solitude, waited for her. Those nights are like sudden breaks in a film at a dingy porn-house. They are desolate lapses in a desolate movie that no one should ever have to see.

Since she was born with Gibson's syndrome and was mentally impaired, Mandy might have had in her unlucky brain an avenue of escape from all the pain. I don't really know. She went to live in a special place when I was fifteen. As Gibson's got worse and worse, she lost all recollection of me. I remember a strange girl-woman sitting in a big chair, wearing a white blouse, a pleated navy-blue skirt, and a plaid bow tie. She would stare for hours at art books that she held upside down in her lap. Her small bare legs hung motionless off the chair and looked like skittles. They made me wince.

The plaid bow tie had belonged to my maternal grandmother. It was the only one of her husband's things that she was able to bring to this country. David Schnorr, my grandfather, died in a concentration camp. So when I read the portrait of a Native American woman named Annawake in Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*, I think of my mother's father, because Kingsolver approvingly has Annawake make a historical analogy: "That's us. Our tribe. We've been through a holocaust as devastating as what happened to the Jews. ..." (David Schnorr had been a minor literary figure in Odessa. He was not as lucky as Barbara Kingsolver.) And when I read no less than two novels by Kingsolver centered on a cringingly cute little girl named Turtle—*The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*—I think of the real little girl we called Ostrich.

This hurts me. I really don't want to use my family to make a point. But when Kingsolver writes so facetiously about lost people, I think of my brother's drug addiction, and the hand that he lost in Nicaragua to the machete of a contra, and his psychotic breakdown in the offices of *The New Yorker*, where he was a frequent contributor. And I think of my father coming back to live with us after a car accident left his entire right side paralyzed. Once I cried from rage and shame after he hit me; now, whenever I saw him in his wheelchair, I cried from rage and guilt.

That was during my first year of college. In my third year, my mother became gravely ill. Fortunately, my brother had straightened his life out, and he returned home with Luisha, his black wife, who had been his nurse in the psychiatric hospital. Together they tended to my mother. It was Luisha, having grown up hearing stories about the lynching of her great-grandfather, who

Sweet and Low

BY LEE SIEGEL

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

(HarperFlamingo, 546 pp., \$26)

I.

Barbara Kingsolver is the most successful practitioner of a style in contemporary fiction that might be called Nice Writing. Nice Writing is a violent affability, a deadly sweetness, a fatal gentle touch. But before I start in on Kingsolver's work, I feel I must explain why I feel that I must start in on it.

I do so for a younger version of myself, for the image that I carry inside me of a boy who was the son of a sadistic, alcoholic father, and of a mother who was hurt but also hurtful, and abusive. And I do not feel the need to make a pretense of sweetness or gentleness as I confess this.

"She told me that maybe one out of every four little girls is sexually abused by a family member. Maybe more," says Taylor, the protagonist of Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, reporting her conversation with a social worker; but in her "Author's Note" to *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver writes that she herself was "the fortunate child of medical and public-health workers, whose compassion and curiosity led them to the Congo. They ... set me early on a path of exploring the great, shifting terrain between righteousness and what's right." It

is easy for Kingsolver, then, to spin such tragic conceits. But I remember my father's heavy hand on my face and the door slamming behind him, as if the slap were a firecracker and the slamming door its echo in some grotesque celebration of violence.

The flesh has its own memory, and sometimes my skin heats up before the flashback lays its heavy hand across my consciousness. It is the opposite of when you touch something hot and it takes a second to feel the pain. I cannot really talk about all the ways my father hurt me. Later, when the door slammed for the last time, and my father left for good, I lay in the dark with my older brother and younger sister and listened to my mother and her boyfriends. Sometimes the men she brought home stayed the night, and sometimes they didn't. I can remember my little sister, Mandy—my brother and I called her "Ostrich" because of the way she buried her head in the bedclothes when she heard the strangers' voices—crying herself to sleep.

I also remember my mother storming into the bedroom that we shared, and screaming at Mandy to shut up. Sometimes my mother kissed me very hard on the mouth, a kiss that no mother should ever give to a son. Then she returned to the bedroom where her boyfriend of the

taught my reckless brother lessons about dignity in adversity. She had seen her own teenage daughter shot dead before her eyes by drug dealers in her neighborhood. We were all very proud of Luisha.

After a while, my uncle Jeremiah came to help out with Tobey, who had been his lover and was now his friend and companion. Jer had been in jail in the '60s and had the soles of his feet beaten so badly by prison guards that he could barely walk. Tobey was HIV-positive and too depressed to work. I admired Jer, and I loved Tobey's spirit. Eventually I took a couple of years off from school and came back home to look after people who had so injured my young life. At night, my mother cried out, my father whimpered, my brother banged his fist against the wall, Luisha screamed in her sleep, Jeremiah sobbed, and Tobey wept. Sometimes I could not make sense of what I was doing there. But somehow I stayed.

I have a pretty good life now, but I cannot forget those nights. They, and all the history behind them, are why I write criticism. I write for the little boy that I was, the little boy crushed by untruth. He was surrounded by facts, but they were inaccurate facts. They did not correlate with the reality of human freedom. They were not true, or beautiful, or good. So these facts might just as well have been fiction; and any fiction that preserved their raw unreality would be an emaciated lie. It would not be true fiction at all.

Thus whenever I see the promulgation of such illusions by two fraudulent Russian artists, or by sanctimonious academic theorists, or by icily virtuous novelists, I sit down and I write for the little boy who craved the truth. I write for all the young boys and young girls who crave the truth. I strike for the children, and for their children's children. And I hope that anyone who takes exception to the ferocity of my tone will think of my father's hand across my face, and of my cruel mother, and of my dying mother, and of poor Ostrich, and of what the Nazis did to David Schnorr. And I hope, cherished reader, that you will not be angry about what I have to confess to you next.

II.

By now you will have realized, I hope, that nothing that I have written here is true, except for the quotations from Kingsolver and the references to her work. I made everything up; I meant it to be satire. I have passed beyond the boundary of good taste, and I apologize to anyone I have offended,

since I know that the situations I described happen, and I know how much pain and sadness they bring. And though I have my own portion of pain and sadness, I also know that there are degrees of suffering. But the actuality and the complexity of suffering: that is precisely my point.

For at least the past decade, American writers have been pouring forth a cascade of horror stories about their condition or the condition of their characters. The Holocaust, ethnic genocide, murder, rape, incest, child abuse, cancer, paralysis, AIDS, fatal car accidents, Alzheimer's, chronic anorexia: calamities drop from the printer like pearls. These are elemental events of radically different proportions, and the urge to make imaginative sense of them is also elemental. Some contemporary writers treat these subjects strongly and humbly and insightfully, but too many writers engaged in this line of production turn out shallow and distorted work. They seem merely to be responding to a set of opportunities created by a set of social circumstances. In their hands, human suffering goes unimagined, and the imagination goes hungry and deprived.

There are a handful of reasons behind this trend. For a start, we live at a uniquely prosperous time in a uniquely prosperous society, a moment in which

tragedy and catastrophe seem all the more confusing and inexplicable, and so their depiction is all the more gripping. Also, we are fortunate to inhabit a culture in which practical techniques for mastering life's hardships have become so successful that it is perhaps natural for writers to develop a technique—a Calamity Style—for the conceptual mastery of life's inevitabilities.

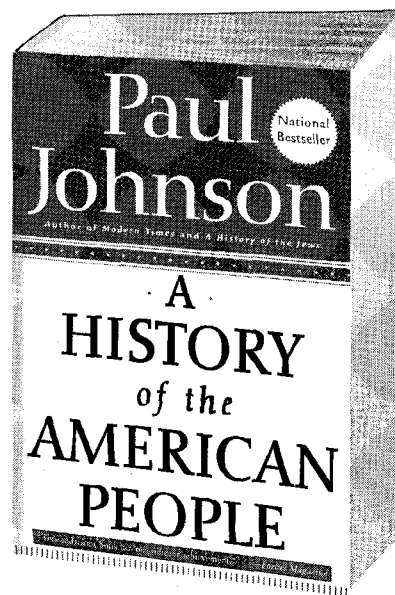
Maybe we also feel, in our increasingly freewheeling culture, less protected as the forms of gratification multiply. The more gratification you seek, after all, the less stable and constant you are, whether you consciously feel yourself shifting or not. In this sense, these catastrophic tales are the emblems of a faintly enveloping anxiety. Then, too, since we live in such flush and tranquil times, more and more people have the privilege of shunning conventional work-routines and taking up creative labors. Writing, which requires no special training, holds out the promise of the freest kind of life. The problem is that not everyone who takes up the occupation of writer has the writer's gift. Thus extremity becomes an aid to straining imaginations.

But I think there is one reason for Calamity Writing that looms much larger than the others: it advances the amoral pursuit of a virtuous appearance. This is where Calamity Writing blossoms into

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the plastic flower of Nice Writing. The portrait of people doing evil things to each other, or of someone sick and dying, or of a person psychologically hurt, flatters the portraitist. It can enfold the writer in a mantle of invincible goodness. The artistic worth of the portrait fades away as an issue. What remains is the invaluable appearance of goodness.

I am not talking about hypocrisy. I am talking about the mere appearance of goodness as a substitute for honest art. The trend is everywhere. It is to be found, for example, in Lorrie Moore's short stories, especially "People Like That Are the Only People Here," the longest tale in *Birds of America*, her acclaimed new collection. The story is about a newborn baby dying of cancer. That is, the story's emotional register begins, from the very first paragraph, far beyond the reader's capacity to develop his or her own response to it. The effect is to place the supremely empathetic author in a protected niche, far beyond the reader's capacity to criticize. In this way Nice Writing fosters Nice Criticism. Anyone who writes nice writes with impunity.

Barbara Kingsolver can be a very funny writer; her infrequent outbursts of humor make up her best quality. And those plots: when they do not hit patches of dense cuteness and saccharine emotion, they unfurl swiftly and engagingly, as the newspaper reviewers like to say. Still, if it were not for professional purposes, I would never read her. The loveliness becomes unbearable. From *The Bean Trees*:

But it didn't seem to matter to Turtle, she was happy where she was.... She watched the dark highway and entertained me with her vegetable-soup song, except that now there were people mixed in with the beans and potatoes: Dwayne Ray, Mattie, Esperanza, Lou Ann and all the rest.

And me. I was the main ingredient.

From *Animal Dreams*:

Sure I remember when we almost drowned in a flood. Plain as day. God, Codi, don't you? We found those abandoned coyote pups, and the river was flooding, and you wanted to save them. You said we *had* to.

From *Pigs in Heaven*:

Taylor puts up her hand, knowing what's coming. "Mama, I know I wasn't nice, but she's a kook." She glances at Turtle, who is using Alice's ballpoint carefully to blacken the entire state of Nevada.

"A kook in need of kindness."

From "Paradise Lost," an essay in the collection *High Tide in Tucson*:

I went to the Canaries for nearly a year, to find new stories to tell, and to grow comfortable thinking in Spanish. Or so I said; the truth is closer to the bone. It was 1991, and in the U.S. a clamor of war worship had sprung like a vitriolic genie from the riveted bottles we launched on Baghdad. Yellow ribbons swelled from suburban front doors, so puffy and ubiquitous as to seem folkloric. But this folklore, a prayer of god-speed to the killers, allowed no possibility that the vanquished might also be human. I grew hopeless, then voiceless. What words could I offer a place like this? Five hundred years after colonialism arrived in the New World, I booked a return passage.

"An easy book to enjoy," *The New Yorker* said about Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*; "rich fodder," said the *Denver Post*, meaning well, about her second novel, *Animal Dreams*; full of "issues that are serious, debatable and painful," said the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* about *Pigs in Heaven*, her third novel; "delightful, challenging, and wonderfully informative" wrote the *San Francisco Chronicle* about *High Tide in Tucson*. The standard congratulations are especially appropriate for Kingsolver's work, for they echo her work's self-congratulatory quality. Still, if these smug and trivial books do any violence to clarity or to reality, it is a minor aesthetic crime. It is a matter for the local authorities. Let *Elle* or *Allure* handle it. When they are praised for their seriousness, well, that is another matter.

III.

Kingsolver does not exactly outrage me, because she is so damn nice; but she is becoming outrageous. With the publication of *The Poisonwood Bible*, this easy, humorous, competent, syrupy writer has been elevated to the ranks of the greatest political novelists of our time. The *New York Times Book Review* praised *The Poisonwood Bible* as a "profound work of political, psychological, and historical understanding." An obtuse profile of the writer in *The New York Times Magazine* declared that "perhaps only Kingsolver, of all contemporary novelists, has the expertise to pull off" *The Poisonwood Bible*'s portrayal of white Europeans and Americans confronting black Africans in the 1950s and 1960s. In *The Nation*, John Leonard anointed Kingsolver as "our very own Lessing and our very own Gordimer."

Nearly all the reviews that I have read of *The Poisonwood Bible* have praised it in approximately the same lofty terms. Those who found something to criticize in the best-selling novel couched their criticism in the most anguished idiom, as if they were forced by circumstance to

leave litter in a National Park. Writing in *The Washington Post*, Jane Smiley rightly observed that Kingsolver's portrait of Nathan Price, an abusive father and fanatical Baptist missionary, is so flat and one-dimensional as to be totally implausible as a fictional construction. But this is not, Smiley adds, Kingsolver's fault. No, Kingsolver's admitted "failure" is the fault of American culture.

And yet. Nathan's enigmatic one-sidedness reflects our culture's failure to understand the humanity of those who seem to be the source of evil.... The author loses interest in Nathan, tries to compensate by giving him a dramatic death that seems pale in the telling. This failure goes right to the heart of who we are as a culture and how we look at ourselves: Yes, there are those who hurt others and show no remorse, who do not acknowledge the damage they have done. But they, in the end, are us. They should be acknowledged, allowed to say who they are, recognized. Loved, even, if not by readers and citizens, then at least by their own creators.

Smiley's peroration on self-abnegating goodness is the bonus of virtuous appearance that Nice Critics instantly reap when they nicely review Nice Writing. Since Kingsolver is the queen of Nice Writing, she has been the constant beneficiary of this kind of criticism. You can find a representative example of her niceness in a talk that she gave in 1993 called "Careful What You Let in the Door." It appears in *High Tide in Tucson*, which came out that same year.

Three years earlier, Kingsolver had published *Animal Dreams*, a novel that was partly about American involvement in the Nicaraguan civil war during the 1980s. Its dedication reads "in memory of Ben Linder," a reference to Benjamin Linder, a young American engineer working in Nicaragua whom the contras killed in an ambush. In her essay, Kingsolver writes:

It matters to me ... that we citizens of the U.S. bought guns and dressed up an army that killed plain, earnest people in Nicaragua who were trying only to find peace and a kinder way of life. I wanted to bring that evil piece of history into a story, in a way that would make a reader feel sadness and dread but still keep reading, becoming convinced it was necessary to care.

There is something characteristically fishy about Kingsolver's language here. Why are all the good, murdered Nicaraguan people "plain" and "earnest"? If some of them had been complicated and ironic, then would caring readers have regarded killing them as a public service? And if the Nicaraguan peasantry really had been behind the Sandinista revolution, would it have been because they were trying to find "a kinder way of

life," and not because the revolution offered peasants ownership of their land and the freedom to decide for themselves whether to be kind or unkind? The surfeit of sentiment rings with an absence of true conviction.

This does not bode well for fiction. You can fault Kingsolver for not knowing—or refusing to know, or not caring—that the mass of impoverished Nicaraguans astutely saw the Sandinistas as elites trying to steal their land and impose their will; or for not acknowledging that the Sandinistas were displacing and murdering Nicaragua's Miskito Indians; or for not knowing—or not caring, or not being convinced of the fact—that "Ben" Linder, whom Kingsolver never met, was carrying a rifle when he was cut down. But the writer has her politics, and she is entitled to believe that her advertisement of virtue is sufficient for her politics. In politics, certainly, rhetoric can be very effective. Yet the political novelist is *not* entitled to think that her politics are sufficient for her art.

Gordimer or Lessing—for all their differences—would have so complicated a novel about Nicaragua that the truth about the revolution, when it finally unfolded, would have been already embedded in the novel's multilayered psychic and social world. And they would have retained, as they do, their political values. Yet *Animal Dreams* is not about character or society. It is about "serious, debatable, and painful issues": a father with Alzheimer's; a corporation's health-threatening exploitation of a small town; class prejudice; ethnic prejudice; cruelty to animals.

Its sub-subplot of a young woman agri-culturist from America named Hallie—whom we never meet—doing volunteer work in Nicaragua—where we never go—is just one heart-tugging flourish among all the others. It clinches the novel's principal plot, which is the not-terribly-gripping saga of Hallie's sister, a thirty-two-year-old woman named Codi, who goes back to her hometown to figure out who she is and what she should do with her life. (Kingsolver's books are self-help books disguised as novels.) When Codi learns that the contras murdered Hallie, she suddenly matures. Hallie's murder, she tells us, is like a "flower in the soil of another country." One woman's political assassination is another woman's step toward personal growth.

There was once an American president whose cloying promise to Americans of a "kinder, gentler nation" was a gift to anyone who wanted to prove his or her principles without acting on them. The simple derisive repetition of the phrase guaranteed the right adver-

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We brought up the rear, the army recruiter and I.
Ghostly bulwarks of white cattle stood their ground.
In the sensible shoes I'd borrowed,
I picked my way through a no man's land

of pasture spiked with poppies.
Where chimney swifts banked and dove,
no gnat was safe in the twilight of England.
On the wild mustard a gaseous ground mist hung.

On the continent, what passed for peace
late in this century threatened to hold,
though somewhere far off. Neighbors still warred
in the old ways, house to house.

What was fifty years to a war?
Nothing to the great gardener,
who loved a beech tree most of all.
He knew he could make England look natural

just by moving a stream, building a hill.
It was 1772. Nothing would change
but he changed it, who wouldn't see the beeches grown.
The manmade lakes overrun with reeds,

the little ruin more ruined than ever—
we'd take the folly first, the man beside me said,
in the crisp voice of retired officer,
which is to say, of Sunday painter and church organist.

All that summer he was bored.

DEBORA GREGER

sarial status. Kingsolver may be a favorite figure on the left, but in truth her "kinder way of life" rhetoric spans the ideological spectrum. Who, really, is for evil corporate interests or for class or ethnic prejudice? Is there anyone who would like to go to bat for cruelty to animals, or for Alzheimer's? Kingsolver's novels are filled with indictments of people and forces that make children suffer. They are bursting with tender affirmations of motherhood. In the acknowledgments to *Pigs in Heaven*, she thanks Nancy Raincrow Pigeon and Carol Locust, among others, "who helped me understand the letter and spirit of the Indian Child Welfare Act." I dare you to give that novel a negative review.

Such a guaranteed universal appeal is why, Kingsolver might be surprised to know, she has been referred to enthusiastically in places such as the *Federal Reserve Bank of New York Economic Policy Review* and *Management Review*. According to the *ABA Journal*, a judge ordered women offenders to read *Animal Dreams*. They love Kingsolver even in *The Washington Times*, and they like her fiction even in

The Weekly Standard ("a gentle allegorist ... easy, flowing prose, engaging characters, and a biting wit"). And there is no reason why they shouldn't. Under the guise of a strong political stance, Kingsolver purveys a potpourri of tried-and-true soppy attitudes that are attached, with demographic precision, to an array of popular causes. She is something new: a political novelist who is careful not to step on anyone's toes. There is not a single sentiment expressed in her fiction that you could not express in an exchange with a stranger at a convention, or during a job interview, or on a first date.

But this seamlessness with the superficial rhetorical conventions of everyday life is actually a terrible disjunction from life. It is why Kingsolver's working-class characters look and sound like the idea of working-class people held by a professional couple's privileged daughter who studied music and languages at DePauw. (I mean Kingsolver.) Her working-class characters are dumb or saintly, and her young working-class women—except for her brilliant, confident,

heroic fictional personae—are almost always stupid and selfish and reckless with the nail polish and mascara. They are literary tautologies: they are so much like themselves that they bear no relation to who they really are.

Kingsolver is so committed to keeping up the appearance of conventional morality that she sometimes mixes up her molasses-sweet descriptions of animals with her molasses-sweet condescension to the downtrodden. Seeing some pigs wander into her yard, the elderly Alice in *Pigs in Heaven* thinks: "The poor things are just looking for a home, like the Boat People." Underneath all the whispering of sweet nothings into the reader's ear, Kingsolver doesn't really seem to like human beings. She is sweetly lethal. It is the obverse side of her unremitting Niceness; perhaps it is the source of her Niceness. She describes her characters with an air of haughty repulsion, the way adolescents will stand in a corner at a party and quietly annihilate the other people there, until the other people come over and reveal that they do not have the power to hurt.

He was bald and red-faced and kind of bossy.

Otis is very old and bald with bad posture and big splay feet in white sneakers.

Her eyelashes were stuck together with blue mascara and sprung out all around her eyes like flower petals.

The woman has colorless flippy hair molded together with hairspray so that it all comes along when she turns her head.

Her doughy breasts in a stretched T-shirt tremble.

The manager has fat, pale hands decorated with long black hairs.

They look strange: one is shrunken-looking with overblown masses of curly hair; another is hunky and bald, the head too big for the body.

The cousin she's just met is a thin, hump-backed woman in canvas shoes and a blue cotton dress that hangs empty in the bosom.

The woman has swollen knuckles and a stained red blouse.

This is perhaps the same icy indifference to humanity that is behind Kingsolver's portrayal of a retarded character who speaks perfect English. It is a safety measure for the preservation of the Nice Appearance of respecting retarded people: "Mom, I accidentally walked on the railroad tracks to Havasu." (The retarded character is named Buster; and Buster happens to be, Kingsolver tells us in her essay "High Tide in Tucson," the name of a real-life hermit crab she keeps as a pet.)

It is the same polar numbness, this time to social reality, that lets Kingsolver depict the evil corporation in *Animal Dreams* as leaving its lucrative position in the small town without a legal challenge. And a cognate authorial glacialness has the lower-class Native American man in that novel, Loyd Peregrina, immediately decide to abandon his decades-old business enterprise of investing in fighting cocks. Why? Because the heroic Codi, his new girlfriend from a higher social stratum—and Kingsolver's fictional persona in this novel—thinks that the spectacle of battling birds is mean and icky. Even if the income from training the birds helps Loyd to survive. This is the sort of cruelty of which the saintly-in-their-own-eyes are especially capable.

And what cold-heartedness lies behind *The Bean Trees*'s subplot of a Mayan couple from Guatemala, with connections to the left-wing guerrillas, escaping from the death squads to the United States. The Guatemalan soldiers, the narrator tells us, wanted information from the couple. So the army abducted their infant child—for Kingsolver, political violence is not political violence unless it affects the adorable Turtles of the world—and threatened to give her to a presumably upper-class family unless the couple told the army what it demanded to know about their rebel comrades. This, miraculously, gave the couple the time and the opportunity to flee.

In the real Guatemala, however, during the army's onslaught against the Indians in the '80s, the army simply tortured people from whom they wanted information. They raped the wives in front of their husbands, they beat the husbands to death in front of their wives, they killed the children in front of their parents. In *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver introduces us to a relatively Nice death squad. For Nice Readers must not get the idea that politics has other features besides Nice Attitudes. Otherwise they might stop singing the vegetable-soup song, and get real.

IV.

From the terror in Guatemala in *The Bean Trees*, to the revolution and the counter-revolution in Nicaragua in *Animal Dreams*, to the plight of Native Americans in *Pigs in Heaven*, Kingsolver has, as she would say, "booked a return passage" to Africa and produced *The Poisonwood Bible*. Of all her books, though, her new book most closely resembles *Animal Dreams*. They both embody the full flowering of the Quindlen Effect.

I date the Quindlen Effect from December 13, 1992, though other readers might have their own favorite moments

from the newspaper career of Anna Quindlen, the former *New York Times* columnist and one of the original Nice Queens. On that December day, Quindlen published a scathingly indignant editorial comment on the Glen Ridge sex assault trial, in which four male high school students were accused of sexually assaulting a twenty-one-year-old retarded woman.

True to her niche, Quindlen attacked with scathing indignation actions that no sane *Times* reader would ever defend. No neutral observer would defend four boys who manipulated a retarded girl into performing oral sex on them and inserted a broomstick and then a bat into her vagina; no more than any neutral observer would defend death squads or evil corporations. But Quindlen went on. She displayed a surfeit of sentiment ringing with an absence of true feeling that was downright Kingsolverian: "Most neighborhoods are divided into three kinds of children: those who torture the slow kid, those very few who defend her, and the great majority, who stand silent." But the great majority of teenagers in Glen Ridge, New Jersey did not stand silent as the assault took place. The assault took place in a basement, and the great majority knew nothing about it. And most neighborhoods are really not like that.

During that time, though, there was a place where the neighborhoods really had deteriorated. Right next to Quindlen's commentary, the *Times* published an essay by the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic exposing the mass rapes of Bosnian Muslim women by Bosnian Serb men. Drakulic was not attacking actions that everyone already despised; she was exposing actions that few Americans knew were happening. Her essay included chilling first-person descriptions of rape and mutilation and murder in Bosnia. The last account, given by a sixteen-year-old girl, ended with a paragraph that was also the final paragraph of Drakulic's piece: "I would like to be a mother some day. But how? In my world, men represent terrible violence and pain. I cannot control that feeling."

Looking at the Op-Ed page that morning, it was hard to avoid the implication that it had a theme. With Drakulic's article right there alongside Quindlen's article, the point was made that the male violence in Bosnia and the male violence in that suburban basement were phases of the same moral phenomenon. The analogy was appalling, and not only owing to its childish moral equivalence. It was appalling also because the moral equivalence promoted the idea that con-

demning the male violence at home would suffice as a response to the male violence abroad. (And of course we never did fight the violence in Bosnia, not until it was too late.) In the hands of monsters of empathy such as Anna Quindlen, the immediate preoccupations of the American self subjugate and domesticate and assimilate every distant tragedy.

Lenin famously declared that imperialism was the final stage of capitalism. He was wrong. A narcissistic capitalism, in fact, is the final stage of imperialism. Kingsolver is the bold anti-imperialist who fled to sunny Spain in order to escape government repression in Arizona during the Gulf war. And she is also the narcissist-imperialist par excellence. For the conclusion of *Animal Dreams* depicts an inversion based on a Quindlen-like connection. Kingsolver transforms the contra helicopters that mow down plain, earnest people in Nicaragua into the helicopter in which Codi's mother died after giving birth to Hallie. If it had not been for Hallie's letters describing those helicopters, we learn, Codi would never have remembered seeing her mother taken up in the helicopter. This was a memory that she needed to recover so that she suddenly could become an adult. Thus Hallie's death is redeemed by Codi's finally getting a life. Black night in Nicaragua; morning in America.

Kingsolver has perfected the Quindlen Effect in *The Poisonwood Bible*. The novel's cartoonish main-spring is a tyrannical Baptist missionary named Nathan Price, who takes up residence in the Congo in the late 1950s with his wife, Orleanna, and their four daughters. Told by Orleanna and each of her daughters in turn, *The Poisonwood Bible* portrays Nathan's fanatical insensitivity to the Congolese, which alienates his small congregation, resulting in the death of his youngest daughter Ruth May (the children again), and in his own madness, and in the disintegration of the family.

The novel has a silver lining, though. The silver lining is the indignant Kingsolver's most characteristic device. The other daughters—the bigoted right-wing Rachel; the sensitive and conscientious Leah; Leah's twin, the hemiplegic clairvoyant genius and verbal prodigy Adah—all come into their own by novel's end. In the course of all this, we also enjoy saintly glimpses of Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first democratically elected prime minister, whose probable murder by Mobutu's men got an enthusiastic green light and support from an Eisenhower worried about Lumumba's alliance with the Soviet Union.

"There is wisdom in every sentence,"

wrote the editors of the *New York Times Book Review* about *The Poisonwood Bible*. I hope they are not referring to the analogy that Kingsolver makes between Nathan's harshness toward the women in his family, and Belgium, whose King Leopold annexed the Congo in 1901, and cold-war America. As Orleanna puts it, again and again:

And where was I, the girl or woman called Orleanna, as we traveled those roads.... Swallowed by Nathan's mission, body and soul. Occupied as if by a foreign power.... This is how conquest occurs....

Nathan was something that happened to us, as devastating in its way as the burning roof that fell on the family Mwanza; with our faces scarred by hell and brimstone we still had to track our course.... But his kind will always lose in the end. I know this, and now I know why. Whether it's wife or nation they occupy, their mistake is the same: they stand still, and their stake moves underneath them.... A territory is only possessed for a moment in time.... What does Okinawa remember of its fall? Forbidden to make engines of war, Japan made automobiles instead, and won the world. It all moves on. The great Delaware moves on, while Mr. Washington himself is no longer even what you'd call good compost. The Congo River, being of a different temperament, drowned most of its conquerors outright.... Call it oppression, complicity, stupefaction, call it what you like, it doesn't matter. Africa swallowed the conqueror's music and sang a new song of her own.

Wisdom in every sentence. And here is Leah on the same theme:

Anatole explained it this way: Like a princess in a story, Congo was born too rich for her own good, and attracted attention far and wide from men who desire to rob her blind. The United States has now become the husband of Zaire's economy, and not a very nice one. Exploitive and condescending....

"Oh, I understand that kind of marriage all right," I said. "I grew up witnessing one just like it."

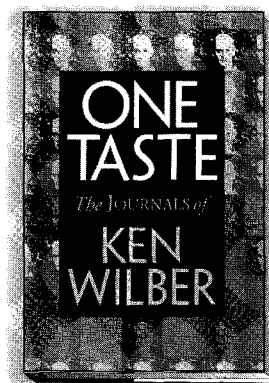
The reduction of history to an afternoon with Oprah is bad enough. But it is really extraordinary, is it not, that our very own Gordimer has written a "political novel" about Africa that does not refer to the present-day shattering events in Africa. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, we hear a lot about how American men, especially bad American Baptist missionary men, physically abuse their wives and daughters (though, as ever, Kingsolver is too nice to portray the abuse). Yet we do not get the slightest reference, or the most veiled allusion, to the Rwandan genocide and its ongoing blood-drenched aftermath, one of the least nice events in modern history, in which even the children were

killed. For Kingsolver, Africa is happily singing "a new song of her own." Something like the vegetable-soup song.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, instead of the momentous present, Kingsolver scavenges for heart-rending bulletins from the past. It is all so easy, this sentimental carpetbagging of a far-away history. We hear about how Belgian overseers on the rubber plantations disciplined their Congolese workers by cutting off their hands. About how the Belgians jailed Lumumba at one point, and how he miraculously "got out" in time for the elections. What Kingsolver doesn't tell her readers is that by 1959, when her novel begins, such cruelty had been defunct for over fifty years. (For the amputation of hands as a widespread instrument of torture, it is contemporary Sierra Leone to which one must look.)

In 1908, the Belgian parliament bought the Congo from King Leopold as a response to the international outcry against the atrocities that Belgian companies had been committing on the Congolese. By 1959, the Belgian Congo had the highest literacy rate and the most widespread health care of any European colony. Almost all of those improvements had to do with the work of missionaries. Most of the missionaries were Catholic, but some were Protestant like Nathan

What revolutionary thinker are Bill Clinton and Al Gore reading?



One Taste: The Journals of Ken Wilber offers an unsurpassed introduction to some of the key ideas of this leading philosopher of our day—as well as a provocative glimpse into Wilber's inner life.



Distributed by Random House

*Boston Globe, August 27, 1998
†New Yorker, October 26, 1998

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Price. And Lumumba did not magically "get out" of jail in time to get elected prime minister. The Belgians let him out, knowing full well that he was going to win.

This is not to say, this is really not to say, that the Europeans did not do atrocious things in Africa right up to decolonization, or that Belgium did not display calamitous self-interest in rushing Congo's independence when the colony was completely unprepared for it. (The Belgians had prohibited the Congolese from obtaining a university education, and when independence came there was not a single trained administrator or military officer.) It is also not to say that Europe and the United States do not have to answer for some portion of Africa's ordeal. But it is Kingsolver who is not playing fair with her readers.

For again she substitutes the image of goodness for honest representations. Almost every reviewer has rightly praised her beautiful evocation of the African landscape and her vivid treatment of African life; but not a single reviewer I read mentioned the twenty-eight-book bibliography that Kingsolver obviously felt obligated to include at the end of her novel, a list with books such as *The Accidental Anthropologist*, *Congo Trails*, *Congo Cauldron*, *The River Congo*, *Back to the Congo*, *Travels in West Africa*, *Swimming in the Congo*, *On the Edge of the Primal Forest*. Many of these books are travel books containing beautiful evocations of the African landscape and exhilarated treatments of African life. They lift the spirit with their vividness, the way Putnam's compact discs do. The influence of this apolitical, upbeat ethnography accounts for the difference in the style of Kingsolver's new novel. And it is why the *The Poisonwood Bible* is so distant from its subject.

Still, the Nice Writing has not disappeared, and it extends its usual protections. You would not know from any of the reviews also that all the women in the family express the same tough ironic contempt for Nathan. Here is Ruth May: "Africa has a million souls," is what Father told him. And Father ought to know, for he's out to save them all." This is presented as the thought of a five-year-old girl, who is supposed to be brutally suppressed by her authoritarian father.

"Ultimately," the *Times* editors wrote, "this is a novel of character; the women discover themselves as they lose faith in Price." But the women in *The Poisonwood Bible* are on to their father's hypocrisy from the very beginning of the novel. They express their skepticism in the same jaunty sarcastic tone, which is the identical tone Kingsolver used for her earlier fictional personae, Taylor and Codi. This is the fifteen-year-old Rachel: "[Father]

was getting that look he gets, oh boy, like Here comes Moses tromping down off of Mount Syanide with ten fresh ways to wreck your life." This is the fourteen-year-old Leah, supposedly in her father's thrall more than her sisters: "'Heavenly Father, deliver us,' I said, although I didn't care for this new angle . . . what was this business of being delivered through hardships?" This is the fourteen-year-old Adah, who refers sardonically to Nathan as "Our Father" and "Reverend": "When the Spirit passed through him he groaned, throwing body and soul into this weekly purge. The 'Amen enema,' as I call it. My palindrome for the Reverend." If this is the story of women struggling for psychic autonomy, they do not have terribly much work to do.

V.

Barbara Kingsolver does not finally give a hoot about Africa. She does not care about Africa (I mean, intelligently and respectfully care, with a sense of its alterity and its complexity) any more than she cared about the simple folk of Nicaragua. That is why the penultimate climax of *The Poisonwood Bible* is not about Africa. It is about our very own Gordimer's favorite domestic themes: cruelty to children and cruelty to animals. Thus her novel begins its climax in a scene depicting the Congolese villagers engaged in a hunt. They set the brush on fire and herd the animals inside the flames.

For every animal struck down, there rose an equal and opposite cry of human jubilation. . . . Of the large animals who came through the fire—bushbuck, warthog, antelope—few escaped. Others would not come out and so they burned: small flame-feathered birds, the churning insects, and a few female baboons who had managed against all odds to carry their pregnancies through the drought. With their bellies underslung with precious clinging babies, they loped behind the heavy-maned males, who would try to save themselves, but on reaching the curtain of flame where the others passed through, they drew up short. Crouched low. Understanding no choice but to burn with their children.

This breaks new ground in monster empathy. Abusive husbands are like conquering countries; mothers and children are the same whether human or animal. Killing is killing. And although, as Kingsolver herself tells us, the villagers are starving, she goes on to explain that this massacre was so cruel that it brought down upon the village a streak of terrible luck.

It is an icy marvel, this spectacle of a writer who can manipulatively wax so emotional and with such impressive

virtue over the killing of animals by starving villagers in a place where, in reality, hundreds of thousands of people had just been exterminated. In a place where, perhaps at the very moment Kingsolver was writing her book, men were raping and murdering wives in front of their husbands (those selfish "heavy-maned males"), and beating the fathers to death in front of the mothers, and killing the children in front of their parents.

But Kingsolver has too much respect for other cultures to refer to the bad things that happen in them. Other cultures have different attitudes toward life and death. Through Adah, who later becomes a medical researcher—she works on the AIDS virus *and* the Ebola virus!—Kingsolver guides us through African values:

People are *bantu*; the singular is *muntu*. *Muntu* does not mean exactly the same as *person*, though, because it describes a living person, a dead one, or someone not yet born. *Muntu* persists through all those conditions unchanged. . . . The transition from spirit to body and back again is merely a venture.

In the world, the carrying capacity of humans is limited. History holds all things in the balance, including large hopes and short lives. . . . Africa has a thousand ways of cleansing itself. Driver ants, Ebola virus, acquired immune deficiency syndrome: all these are brooms devised by nature to sweep a small clearing very well . . . the race between predator and prey remains exquisitely neck and neck.

In Africa, then, death is a state of mind. There they are used to dying, and dying is so exquisitely good for them. The *Times* editors enthusiastically took this up: "perhaps [*The Poisonwood Bible's*] greatest character is collective, the Congolese, whose perfect adaptation to the harshness of their lives amid drought, hunger, pests and diseases is simply beautiful." What a ravishing, talented, instinctive, unself-conscious race of people. And how beautiful is their extinction!

In Kingsolver's Africa, only her intrepid heroines, not the Africans themselves, get the burdensome dignity of moral struggle, confusion, and anguish. Here is Leah, who has chosen to live in Africa with her Congolese husband:

I rock back and forth on my chair like a baby, craving so many impossible things: justice, forgiveness, redemption. I crave to stop bearing all the wounds of this place on my own narrow body. But I also want to be a person who stays, who goes on feeling anguish where anguish is due. I want to belong to somewhere, damn it. To scrub the hundred years' war off this white skin till there's nothing left and I can walk out among my neighbors wearing raw sinew and bone, like they do.

But enough of this frigid treacle. Let me tell you a story about my family, and this time I am writing the truth. My grandfather, Saul Siegel, who died a few months ago at the age of ninety-two, was with UNICEF in the Belgian Congo in 1960, when Congo got its independence. He was there during the riots and the strife and the civil war, and he stayed for some time after the United States installed Mobutu. I could not even begin to describe the lives that he saved and the good that he did. He knew that true goodness is the virtue that dare not speak its name. He knew all about the cold, calculating phonies who spray their virtue into your eyes like mace, and also

about the cowards and the fools who abet them to aid themselves. I loved him very much. I sat next to his bed and watched him die as he struggled to keep breathing. I saw the light start to fade from his beautiful green eyes, and I let him pull me toward him by my shirt with his trembling hands so that he could whisper to me his farewell. With my heart full of love and grief and terror, I leaned toward him, and he pulled himself up a little and he rasped softly, and then he screamed: "Get Kingsolver!"

I did it again. I lied. I am sorry, but I cannot resist the temptation. The rewards are so great. And the words are so cheap. •

God and Man in the Oval Office

BY JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

From the Eye of the Storm: A Pastor to the President Speaks Out by J. Philip Wogaman

(Westminster John Knox Press, 139 pp., \$12)

Rebuilding Your Broken World by Gordon MacDonald

(Thomas Nelson, 224 pp., \$12.99)

J. Philip Wogaman is the pastor at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., the church attended by the Clintons. (He is a Southern Baptist; she is a Methodist.) Wogaman has taken to the hustings energetically over the past months to defend his parishioner, and he has published a book to "speak out" in the same defense. In a talk to the National Press Club in December, he claimed that the launching of his book was in fact a sad occasion, coming "in the midst of a grave national crisis." He called for all Americans to "rise above partisanship" and to seek forgiveness, reconciliation, and love. Since it is unseemly to profit from a "grave" crisis, Wogaman and his wife have pledged all royalties from the book to charity.

For Wogaman, the Starr report embodied all that is worst about us, with its "condemnation verging often on legalism" and its "preoccupation with immoral behavior." The alternative, he asserts, is a "desire to grow morally and spiritually." The president's pastor certainly does not condone his behavior, but he sees it as a revealing social symptom, a telling blip

on the screen of American culture. In his view, the president was Everyman gone astray by acting out the "pervasive looseness about sexual life in our society."

I have debated Pastor Wogaman on five occasions, four of them friendly encounters on television, and one before a jammed crowd of nearly nine hundred people who poured, on short notice, into the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago for the purpose of considering our views. He is a civil, dedicated man who embodies the considerable strengths of liberal Protestantism in America; but he embodies also its long-standing laxities. Indeed, the thin gruel of liberal Protestantism was all too clear in the recent impeachment crisis, in which major liberal Protestant spokesmen and spokeswomen were missing in action or offering up moral equivalences (Clinton's conduct was bad but Starr's conduct was worse, so we condemn Starr and ignore Clinton); or cultural alibis (the president did what lots of people do), or political deflections (Clinton brought peace to Bosnia, one person told me with a straight face, so why does Monica matter?).

In important ways, the story of liberal Protestantism is the dominant narrative of America in the aftermath of the Puritan hegemony of New England. Puritanism is now only a pejorative term, so that the worst thing you can call somebody these days is "Puritanical." Puritanism certainly is that which liberal Protestantism nowadays is not, including a strong theology of sin, judgment, penitence, and redemption. To be sure, liberal forms of Protestantism and its non-theistic (or at least non-Trinitarian) off-shoots, such as Unitarianism, took many strong, prophetic forms. A good deal of America's political ferment derived from such intense sectarian commitments, from prophetic abolitionism to anti-Vietnam War activism to the agitation for civil rights. Most of those campaigns were mounted by activists of one Protestant persuasion or another, until Catholics came into their own as "mainstream" participants in such activism.

What makes a dominant Protestant variant "liberal" is its sunny spiritual disposition. The language of sin, evil, remorse, judgment, and awe—the stern spirituality of God's justice and righteousness—has given way to a determined optimism, to a "confidence in the infinite possibilities of human development," as Henry Steele Commager put it in *The American Mind*. For liberal Protestantism—in America, this means primarily the many off-shoots of Methodism—human beings are creatures for whom the sky alone is the limit. Vast moral improvement is possible, for persons and for societies. Shimmering dreams of individual and social perfection may be entertained. These projects in limitless meliorism range from new dietary and exercise regimes to social engineering—and they all flow from the perpetually-in-motion post-millennial self-assurance of liberal Protestant politics at its height. In this construction of the history of the soul and the country, Americans have escaped the coils of gloomy theology and delivered themselves to a religion that comports nicely with the American promise of ordered liberty and abundance. Over time, as theological meanings thinned even further, what determined where a family attended church was emotional convenience, a likeable minister, a congenial social atmosphere.

For members of the intellectual classes, an already liberal Protestantism gave way even further to the Feuerbachian premise that religion could be reduced to anthropological categories. And Feuerbach was joined to Emerson, to his vision of a harmonious nature, which was also tied to yearnings for a better (if not a

perfect) society. After all, America herself was favored by an essentially benevolent and benign deity: no gloomy prophecies for purveyors of a religion that tracked quite nicely with the American gospel of progress. Salvation might just be found in the political realm.

It is convictions such as these that help one to make sense of what would otherwise seem almost delusional, like Woodrow Wilson's "distressed impassioned appeal ... for the ratification of the Versailles Treaty ... he told his listeners that 'nothing less depends upon this decision, nothing less than the liberation and the salvation of the world,'" in the words of George Armstrong Kelly in his neglected classic, *Politics and Religious Consciousness in America*. To modern secularists, this Wilsonian prophecy must sound a bit hysterical. Salvific history is a troublesome thing. But this by no means deters those who have sublimated nearly all theological categories into the ambitions of politics.

What good Christians are called to do, in this construction of Christian life, is to be good, to be decent, to be fair, and to support the proper public policies. This ignores utterly what Flannery O'Connor's dark comic characters are haunted by: Christ crucified. Serious Christian theology does not sit well with American optimism or prophetic triumphalism. For both those tendencies refuse to accept a world of limits, and both fail to recognize that we live in a world in which there are events that may rightly be described as demonic.

Americans are a people who sought and seek perfection, and liberal Protestantism has been a vehicle for this always-elusive quest, which, like the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, may lure us into pain and even tragedy. Protestantism in America has lacked what Kelly and others have called "Lutheran irony," by which is meant an attitude of skepticism and a mordant humor about the world's paradoxical and hopelessly mixed ways. Lutheran irony looks for the ineluctable dark side of reforms and revolutions. It exists to rattle the confidence of the social engineers. Lutherans do not look for salvation in the City of Man; or at least they didn't until they, too, began to join the upbeat parade.

The strengths of liberal Protestantism are many: generosity, inclusiveness, civic concern. Its weaknesses derive not from a penury of spirit, but from a misplaced contentedness, and from an ideal of harmony that sees in strong arguments and sharp distinctions only destructive division. This dispensation that prides itself upon its appetite for diversity (race, gen-

der, sexual orientation, and the rest) somehow loses its tolerance and its understanding before evangelicals, serious Catholics and Jews, ironists, grumpy dissenters, disbelievers in progress, believers in a strict God, and all students of imperfection and tragedy. These diversities seem like harbingers of division. Why can't we all just get along?

It is no wonder that liberal Protestantism eventually adopted a therapeutic understanding of the soul's well-being, a thoroughly psychologized approach to spirituality, an instrumental attitude toward moral and religious vexations that now gets mapped from persons to the whole society. In our debate in Chicago, Wogaman insisted that, were the American public to forgive Bill Clinton his sins, this would enormously aid the president in his "maturation" process. Maturation? This is the sort of thing parents hope that their children are doing at about the age of sixteen. It is certainly not what citizens elect a president to accomplish.

Wogaman observed recently in *Newsweek* that the "nation [is] desperate to re-enter [a] moral comfort zone." But surely a moral zone is not a comfort zone. Morality is a discipline of discomfort. It is not designed to bring reassurance and good cheer, to make us feel nice and snugly. In Wogaman's view, however, anyone who refuses the blandishments of comfort zones is an "accuser," which is his regular term for critics of Clinton; a sower of discord, an enemy of civility, sour and mean.

For all these reasons, it is not at all surprising that one of the pastors whom Clinton selected as his spiritual advisers, in addition to his regular pastor Wogaman, is Gordon MacDonald, the pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts. MacDonald speaks from "the heart," which is to say, he confesses to a history of his own travail, an extramarital affair that nearly ruined his marriage and his ministry. Unlike Clinton, MacDonald resigned his post in 1987, in the wake of his disgrace, and devoted himself to rebuilding his life and his family. Indeed, one of the many rules he proffers in his book on "rebuilding your broken world" is to take a serious sabbatical from ordinary duties. Honor and character demand it, from pastors if not from presidents.

Having agreed to undergo counseling as a requirement for his restoration to his ministry, MacDonald has become a counselor-guide to "brokenness" and restoration. His book has all the hallmarks of the familiar genre of American self-help: he provides eighteen "bottom lines" and then, as an epilogue, a nine-

teenth "bottom line." This is precisely what Richard Hofstadter described as "self-help and spiritual technology." By "broken-world people," MacDonald means all men and women whose worlds have fallen apart, and who recognize this fact. In his account, sin appears as "suffering-inducing action," though MacDonald prefers the much less potent "misbehavior." (This is rather like "mislead" for "lie.") Jesus died for our misbehavior? It doesn't quite seem worth the passion of the Incarnate Lord. But this is what a counseling religion proposes. For we "all have sinned or misbehaved."

The problem with all this is that the sinners may be equal, but the sins are not. As intelligent, responsible, and fair people, we are required to assess some infractions lightly and other infractions harshly, not because we are punitive inquisitors with ice-water in our veins but because, if we do not, we will find ourselves trying to sustain a society on the muck of gross moral leveling. MacDonald's Christian version of the "recovery" view of the world offers no wisdom. Its introspection is too unstrict. It is lacking in a sense of moral proportionality, and in its attendant sense of gravity. After all, terrorism, famine, airline and train crashes, physical illness, AIDS, rape, street muggings, wanton murders, "alcohol-related accidents," and surface-to-surface missiles are all part of the broken world. People are hurt in lots of ways.

In the classic American can-do spirit, however, we are enjoined by MacDonald to "know ourselves" and "our capabilities," and to recognize that our "broken-world experiences result from our failure to estimate the performance capabilities of others." What on earth do "the performance capabilities of others" have to do with our own weaknesses? Surely our transgressions originate in ourselves. Notice again the substitution of jargon such as "performance capabilities," which is straight out of a management manual, for the traditional vocabulary of "gifts" and "dignity" and "neighbor." In Christian language, one would speak of a failure to respect the God-given dignity of another, or to refuse the gifts the other has to offer to us and to a community, or to fail to love and serve one's neighbor. Many persons in the human community have little or no "performance capabilities," but they are here with us, and we live among them. They are our moral interlocutors.

MacDonald's book is saddening. It is more evidence of how far a giant chunk of liberal Protestantism has abandoned its powerful tradition, its theological roots, its great literature, its spiritual

discipline. The banalization of moral and spiritual experience in this book is sometimes hard to believe. Consider MacDonald's remarks on grace. When he free-associates to the word "grace," what comes to mind is an overdue premium payment on an insurance policy. ("I think about grace if the insurance payment is overdue"; "Grace is a 'rubber stamp' that says CANCELED and acknowledges that the account is paid for.") So a "grace" period, you see, is good. And there is this: "I think about it when I mail my son's income tax a day after the deadline: his grace and that of the IRS." This is not only homely, it also takes the friction out of religious life.

Pastor Wogaman is a more serious ethicist, but he falls away from the complexity of Christian theology by splitting the world into two. There is love or there is judgment; there is compassion or there is the law. This Manichean simplification is conceptually impoverishing. How did Wogaman arrive at this tendency to do precisely what Reinhold Niebuhr argued should not be done, that is, to divide the world into the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness? He arrived at it by setting the context of the Clinton scandal in a way that omits the following: the Paula Jones suit; the president's history of "misleading"; prior examples of prosecutorial overreach (a subpoena to Monica Lewinsky's mother is bad, but a subpoena to Oliver North's wife, mother, and minister is a matter of no concern); feminist sexual harassment law; the public place in which sexual services were delivered (the Oval Office); and much else. The Clinton scandal, in Wogaman's tendentiously scaled-down account, was only a sad but relatively simple case of presidential "misbehavior" in the private sphere. The knowledge of the president's conduct, says Wogaman, should never have "become" public; and it became public only owing to the oppressive and indefatigable efforts of political enemies. Any aspects of the sordid story that might expose the president to a critical light, to a standpoint from which genuine civic concerns are important, are simply effaced.

Surely questions about thoughtlessness, carelessness, recklessness, mean-spiritedness, and fecklessness are not only legitimate in evaluating the behavior of public leaders, they are essential. Judgment, according to Hannah Arendt, following Kant, is the primary political faculty, and it must come into play. Without it, we, too, turn thoughtless. The absence of judgment not only makes us stupid; it also transforms us into instruments at the disposal of others. Politics

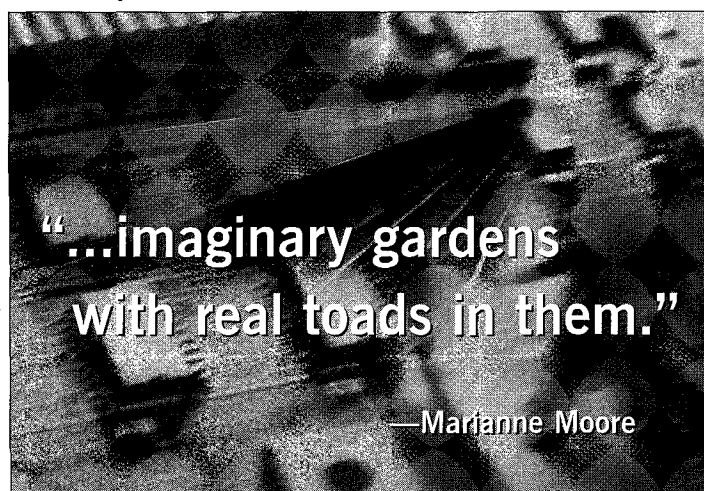
can never be severed from ethics. But Wogaman has severed it. For him, the crisis was pretty straightforward: it was the illicit publicizing of an illicit relationship, a relationship that he views as "typical" of our lamentable sexual mores. The ethical and civic onus is placed entirely on the president's "attackers" and "accusers," who are narrow-minded and harsh.

Throughout his book, Wogaman casts aspersions—gentle aspersions, of course—on those who make judgments. In his apologetic view, judgments are presumptions. The essence of morality, he tells us, is love; and judgment is the antinomy of love. We must go one way

or the other. Wogaman does not seem to notice that his dichotomy is itself a judgment, a discrimination, a principle of moral selection. Then, too, Wogaman is swayed by the fact that the president, however untrustworthy people find him in the most fundamental sense, is "popular." The public likes the president. The president "loves" the people. And so the opinion polls are sacralized. *Vox populi, vox dei.*

This brings us to the president's "prayer breakfast" last September. For its critics, the prayer breakfast was a misuse of religion in the public square for the immediate purpose of political advantage, no matter how sincere the presi-

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dent. (Sometimes he really means it, I'm sure; but serial sincerity is one of his skills.) Should a president be confessing his sins before a gathered group of clergy (as a kind of silent chorus) as the television cameras roll? The confession of sin is a very serious business that takes place within the body of a church, with pastors, priests, families, friends, in prayer. Repentance is not a performance before a mass television audience; not a conclusion drawn from "internal polling"; not a strategy that will "play."

Jesus warned repeatedly of the exploitation of penitence, of the dangers of making a big display out of prayer and confession. Jesus was, as we would say, judgmental; loving *and* judgmental. But the defiant, rebuking Jesus fades from view in Wogaman's text. And what about love? Wogaman himself bemoans the debasement of love in American culture. But is love really just a tender form of non-exclusion, a heightened variety of affability? When Wogaman speaks of love, he uses the language of Christian sentimentalism. He would have us judge the president on the basis of his self-evident love for the nation and the people; but, as Wallace Stegner once observed, "we may love a place and still be dangerous to it."

Wogaman throughout refers to our political society as a "community" rather than a constitutional republic. Must we "define ourselves as a community based on law," he asks, "or is there a deeper sense in which we are a community of mutual caring?" And so law goes off the boards as definitive of "community," and is usurped by more caring. His question is always "which of these, law or love"—again, the distorting dichotomy. Where law and love conflict, law surrenders to love. To be "caring" persons is deemed a higher order of moral and social activity than to be citizens under law.

In a constitutional republic, however, it is only by means of citizenship, and the decent and rational distance that it prescribes, that mutual respect and some form of civic caring are established. In the creation of this universal civic standing, law plays an essential role. American political culture is premised on law, as it must be, given our complexity and our diversity. Rights and duties are certainly more reliable foundations for an American "community" than good feelings and best wishes.

In a society that aspires to justice, moreover, citizens who are believers will not flinch from a God of justice. It distorts both Christianity and America to deny the complicated relation of love to justice. Bill Clinton never tires of professing his admiration for Thomas Jefferson; but it was Jefferson who wrote that

"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." Those are not soothing or forgiving words. But they are American words and they are Christian words;

and they were not written to relieve Americans or Christians of the severity of the moral life, to allow them to "heal" and to "move on." •

The Poet's Plague

BY ADAM KIRSCH

The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative by W. S. Merwin

(Knopf, 331 pp., \$25)

The River Sound by W. S. Merwin

(Knopf, 133 pp., \$23)

W. S. Merwin has one of the most recognizable styles of any American poet now writing. His poems for the last several years have been like blocks carved out of a great quarry of words: unpunctuated, long-lined, every other line indented, their rhythm that of the chant or the unspoken thought. Now, in just the last six months, this prolific poet (he has published seventeen books of poems since 1952, plus four volumes of prose and numerous translations) has produced one book that is the consummation of that style, and another that begins to set it aside. *The Folding Cliffs*, a book-length narrative poem, is composed of hundreds of blocks, few longer than a page. *The River Sound*, a substantial collection, turns to a variety of other forms, including several long poems in idiosyncratic meters. Together, they furnish a full look at Merwin's style and sensibility, his interests and the problems that they entail.

The Folding Cliffs is noteworthy, first and foremost, for its length; three-hundred-page poems are a rarity in any age, but they are especially rare in our own. It might seem that the advent of free verse in this century would have had the opposite effect, that the casting off of the constraints of meter would have made writing at great length easier for poets; but in fact the directive of free verse towards a new sincerity and a new intensity has made extended poems, especially narrative poems, impossible to sustain. Though this century has had its share of important long poems—Pound's *Cantos*, Berryman's *Dream Songs*, Lowell's *Notebook*—they tend to be not narratives but strung lyrics, which claim

the name of single poems only by a special kind of poetic license.

Merwin, appropriately, does not locate his very long poem either in the classical genre, the epic, or in the modern genre, the novel. His subtitle claims only the status of "narrative," a neutral word, implying simply that a story is going to be told. And the main interest of *The Folding Cliffs* lies precisely in its story, a true one, which Merwin discovered in nineteenth-century sources. It is the story of Pi'ilani, a native Hawaiian woman, and her husband Ko'olau, who in the late nineteenth century fell victim first to the plague of leprosy, and then to the cruel policy of the provincial government for dealing with lepers. Instead of consenting to be deported to a nightmarish leper colony on Molokai, Ko'olau fled with his wife and son to a remote valley on their native Kauai, and offered armed resistance to the soldiers who came to capture him. As a result, they were forced to spend years in hiding, until Ko'olau (and his son, who was also infected) finally died of the disease. Pi'ilani returned to her village, and years later her horrific story was recorded by a sympathetic journalist.

Such are the facts as we are given them in Merwin's poem, and though he is not very explicit about his sources, we are to assume that they are largely accurate ("the central events of the story all happened"). They comprise a strong and affecting tale—and a tale that could have been invented specifically to appeal to our cultural moment. For Pi'ilani's story is an ideal brief in the case against American colonialism,

a case that has been receiving more and more sympathetic attention from Americans themselves. She was born into a society already uprooted by white traders and planters; her loved ones contracted a foreign disease that was imported with the commerce that whites brought to the island; and that disease led to repression and finally persecution by the American-controlled government. It is impossible to read *The Folding Cliffs* and not come away with a renewed awareness of the brutality and the arrogance that were certified with the seal of "manifest destiny."

This lesson—and it is clear that this lesson was very much a part of Merwin's didactic intention—has nothing to do with poetry, or indeed with literature. It is political, or historical, or humanitarian, arising simply from the facts of the matter. But *The Folding Cliffs* is a poem, and in reading it we must answer the questions raised by its two aesthetic ambitions, the poetic and the novelistic. First, what is it like as a poem? That is, what interesting deformation of language is brought to bear on the narrative, and how is it sustained over such length? And second, how is the appalling story handled? How do these historical figures become literary characters, and what kinds of demands do they make on our attention?

To sustain a narrative for three hundred pages, a poet would have to employ either a fierce and relentless style, able to engulf all obstacles and delighted with its own movements, like Milton, or Wordsworth; or else a very loose and accepting style, willing to lower itself into prose as the occasion demands. Merwin has chosen the latter course, the path of least resistance. *The Folding Cliffs* shows us quite clearly that his unique style is less a carved block than a mold into which almost anything can be poured.

Reading it, we notice first of all how fruitless is the gesture of omitting punctuation:

....[T]hat summer the Board had informed Knudsen that he would be allowed to keep his patients at Kekaha only for three more months. And in Honolulu he had learned that his friend George Trousseau, whom he considered much the finest of the doctors there—best informed and most clear and gifted—was on the point of resigning from the board of examiners, because his own findings, and the conclusions of the latest Indian Leprosy Commission, had left him convinced that the policy of enforced segregation had always been useless and impossible, and that there were more effective and humane ways of dealing with this disease.

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the many myths propagated by the Arabs are that there is such a thing as a "Palestinian nation" (it's a concept that is not more than 40 years old); that the Israelis (Jews) are "occupiers" (if they were, who would be the sovereign that they displaced?); that Jerusalem is Islam's "third holiest city" (it's never once mentioned in the Koran, but hundreds of times in the Jewish Bible); the concept of "settlements" (with its connotation of illegality); and much more.

Israel — Utterly Vulnerable. These and other myths are what fuel the insistence of the Arabs, of most of the world,

and, yes, also of the United States, that Israel allow itself to be dismembered. All concerned know well that Israel would be utterly indefensible, at the mercy of its implacable enemies, if it were to divest itself of the Jordan Valley, of the "West Bank", of the Gaza Strip, and of the Golan Heights. Why then does the world insist that Israel make itself so utterly vulnerable? Does anybody really believe that the "Palestinians", or any of the Arabs, would be appeased, even if Israel were to yield

everything, except perhaps Tel Aviv and its suburbs? Everybody knows the answer. It would be an emphatic "NO", because the very existence of Israel, in whatever reduced territory, is an intolerable insult to the Muslim Arabs, for whom Israel must be rubbed out regardless of the sacrifices to be brought.

"By its pious insistence on 'justice for the Palestinians' and pursuit of the 'peace process', by fomenting and profiting from the buildup of weapons of mass destruction solely destined for the destruction of Israel, the world actively promotes this second Holocaust."

Why does the world focus on the spurious claims of the "Palestinians", an artificially created nationality that never in recorded history had an identity or country of their own? Why is there no clamor that the French and Spanish give an independent country to their Basque minorities? How about the Kurds? How about the Tibetans; and so many others? Nobody cares. Nobody wants to "liberate" them. It's only the Jews who are being asked to dismember their tiny country, less than half of the size of San Bernardino County in California.

The Arab countries (and Iran) are frantically arming themselves with the most dreadful weapons of mass destruction. As the world knows, it is for one purpose only—namely the destruction of Israel. Two or three nuclear weapons would wipe Israel off the map once and for all. Retaliation by Israel, the destruction of major Arab cities, and millions of Arab casualties, would not deter the Muslim fanatics from pursuing their goal. For them, it would be a small price to pay. With Israel dismembered, with five or six Arab states poised to attack with weapons of mass destruction, can anybody really doubt that a second Holocaust, even more terrible than the first one, is just about upon us? By its pious insistence on "justice for the Palestinians" and pursuit of the "peace process", by fomenting and profiting from the buildup of weapons of mass destruction solely destined for the destruction of Israel, the world actively promotes this second Holocaust. Deep down inside, does the world really want the Jews to live or to disappear?

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In Merwin's book, of course, the above passage appears as verse. It has line breaks—after “summer,” “allowed,” “months,” “Trousseau,” and so on—and no punctuation. Yet it is not just possible, it is inevitable, that the reader silently reinserts the punctuation and reads the passage as prose, more or less as I have given it here. The simple demands of reading for so long with no actual meter leave the brain no choice. And once the verse is prosed, it becomes clear that it is not “poetic” in any significant way: there is no simile or metaphor, no interesting rhythm, no conceit or symbol, not a single surprising word choice.

Admittedly, the above passage is more prosaic by its very subject than many others in Merwin's poem. But consider one of the occasional moments that are clearly meant to be lyric:

The valley is the mountain split open
to windward
to the northwest to the sea to the horizon
where the ancient peaks sailed away sinking
before there was
anyone before the archaic words were
first uttered
and from the crags at the head of the valley
to the winding
stream beds and the drapery of forest
tumbling into
the braided ravines it is so far down that
only
sections of that carved land can be seen. . .

The basic feature of this style is the running together of broken phrases, giving the impression of speech in little gulps, as in a chant or an impassioned recitation. As in a chant, however, everything remains portentous, atmospheric, veiled. The triple repetition without benefit of conjunctions—the most regular feature of Merwin's manner—gives the impression not of richness, but of picking three words because no one word was necessary: “to the northwest to the sea to the horizon.” The adjectives are too familiar to add any new meaning or inflection: mountain peaks are “ancient,” streams are “winding.” The landscape that is described does not stand clearly before us. It is a mood, not a place.

Oddly, the poet whom Merwin resembles most at such moments is Swinburne, the once-eminent Victorian. Swinburne's poems look a bit like Merwin's on the page:

The depths stand naked in sunder behind
it, the storms flee away;
In the hollow before it the thunder is taken
and snared as a prey;
In its sides is the north-wind bound; and its
salt is of all men's tears,
With light of ruin, and sound of changes,
and pulse of years;

With travail of day after day, and with
trouble of hour upon hour.

These lines are from the “Hymn to Proserpine,” and their subject is “the wave of the world.” Compare a passage from *The Folding Cliffs*, also beginning with a wave:

Born in a dark wave the fragrance of red
seaweed
born on the land the shore grass hissing
while the night slips
through a narrow place a man is born for
the narrows
a woman is born for where the waters open
the passage is for a god it is not for a
human
the god is a gourd full of water and vines
climbing from it. . .

Unlike Merwin, obviously, Swinburne rhymes insistently. But other features are remarkably similar. The details are casual, hard to fix in the mind; the imagery awkward (“light of ruin,” “the god is a gourd”); the motion propulsive, not like a sentence or a thought, but drawing on a preconscious, tidal rhythm that abolishes precision.

On stylistic grounds, then, *The Folding Cliffs* is a success only in this negative sense: it is able to be as “unpoetic” as the material often requires. For long stretches, the style acts like a pair of eyeglasses which we see through, except for a few moments when we remember, awkwardly, that they are there. When Merwin's verse insists most on its style, it is least absorbing. And the consequence is that renewed pressure is put on the narrative itself, on the plot and the characters; for if we are not enjoying the continuous presence of a beautiful style, we cannot ignore or pass lightly over the action (as we can do in many parts, say, of *Paradise Lost*).

Merwin did not call his poem an epic, and it is not an epic in any conventional sense. Still, Merwin suggests that it is precisely the marginality of his story, geographically and socially, that gives it the centrality, the claim upon the reader, of an epic. This story of expropriation and oppression is the real story of America's founding, our inverted *Aeneid*; this story, and not the triumphal march taken for granted in Frost's notorious poem “The Gift Outright,” is the deep truth about our history. This insistence on seeing the last made first is a natural reaction to the vast and long-standing smugness to which Frost gives voice:

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

The most obviously objectionable word here is “war”—for as Merwin shows, and as no one can any longer dispute, the “deeds” by which most of the west was won were more often theft, pollution, and deception, punctuated by ever-more-lopsided battles. Yet the word most calculated to irritate Merwin is “unstoried.” The word “story” is one that, like “desire,” has recently enjoyed a baleful vogue. In the innocent phrase “telling [‘our’ or ‘my’] story,” all kinds of grievances have made their nest: for telling a story now implies validation, self-assertion, rectification, a reconquest of the terrain of language once held by an oppressor. *The Folding Cliffs* comes back to the word again and again, as if to demonstrate that the Hawaiian islands were anything but “unstoried”: their legends play a large role in Merwin's narrative, and they are always recounted with a hushed reverence. Indeed, there is throughout Merwin's book a distinct piety. He believes that, by telling this neglected “story,” he is doing an act of homage and restitution to the islands where he lives.

Yet it is just this piety that mars *The Folding Cliffs*. For it imposes two iron rules: that none of the protagonists will ever be made to look foolish, venal, or wicked; and that the poet himself will never, even hypothetically, distance himself from the beliefs and the actions of his protagonists. Merwin, Ko'olau, and Pi'ilani have a united front that none of the book's villains can crack. And so the entire poem is suffused with the author's right-thinking, which is itself, as exceptionless benevolence generally is, a form of condescension.

The problem is most acute when Merwin is relating a piece of native legend or superstition. At one point, he is narrating the death of the native king of Kauai, Kaumuali'i, which gave Westerners their first chance to infiltrate the island:

on Kauai
the news of his death released a ground
swell of disaster
there was wild mourning and the
succession was dubious
nobody could be certain about keeping
the land they lived on. . .

after the summer solstice that year came
an eclipse of the sun
and the missionaries kept saying that
it meant nothing

Now, surely we are not to believe that Merwin himself thinks that the eclipse “meant something,” that it was an actual sign of the chaos to come. If he does

not, however, then the narrative status of his oblique mockery of the missionaries—who, in their rational Western way, dismiss the eclipse as meaningless—must be put in question. Merwin is pretending, rhetorically, to side with native omen-reading wisdom against white reason. But we must assume that, in fact, he falls on the opposite side of that divide. In other words, he is extending poetic and intellectual charity to the natives: he is patronizing them. And this is an inevitable result of his refusal to see any evil (such as superstition) in a people who had so much evil done to them.

We encounter the same problem when Merwin is discussing Kaleimanu, the bright and curious child of Pi'ilani and Ko'olau. He is not a major character, but he bears a single, significant characteristic: he is a lover of "stories," actual and legendary. Here is how Merwin describes Kaleimanu's curiosity:

even when he was playing with all the others
he kept listening for something and he wanted to hear stories
he was a story catcher he said and if a story
flew by him he would catch every word and keep it
alive and later we would find that he knew it
all the way through but he wanted to hear it again
to be told it again and he said he knew that stories
were hiding all around him in places telling themselves
and he said that each of them knew where it was going

Or again, later on:

he wanted to know the exact name of everything
and then why it was called that and what its story was
he coaxed the stories together believing that they
would recognize each other and have things to tell each other...
for him all the stories were parts of one tale...

Here there is an interesting fusion of two forms of contemporary right-thinking: a postcolonialist respect for native myth as a higher kind of truth, and a poststructuralist respect for narratives as determining our world and constituting our selves. This allows Merwin to flavor his fairy-tale pathos—"he was a story catcher he said"—with a bit of the mysticism of narrativity—"all the stories were parts of one tale." But this attitude dodges the harder question which must eventually arise: do we need to share

Kaleimanu's attitude towards "stories"? That is, must we accept that "stories" have an independent life, a determinative truth, that they precede us and demand our respectful attention? If the answer is no—if we see Kaleimanu's stories, as I think we must see them, as at best quaint—then Merwin is again blurring an essential distinction: between moral respect for the native Hawaiians as human beings and intellectual assent to their worldview.

But then, Merwin's pervasive argument in this book is that the Hawaiian worldview is indeed superior to Western rationalism, for all the familiar reasons: the former is holistic, the latter exploitative; the former is humble, the latter arrogant. We see such intimations throughout the poem, in passages long and short. The white missionaries' church on Kauai has the "smell of dying"; another church has "the salt smells of sweat and mules and unkindness." The white minister, Pastor Rowell, tells the native children that "you must learn to want more than you have/it will elevate your characters," when we are meant to know that precisely this ambition is the root of all the Western evils. Even a relatively sympathetic white character, Valdemar Knudsen, has the symbolically fraught occupation of botanist:

they picked flowers
not to wear nor for medicine but to talk about
and draw pictures of and pull apart and write about
they shot birds not to eat but to measure and draw
and count the feathers and they asked their names....

It is no coincidence that this passage comprises an unspoken allusion to Wordsworth's "we murder to dissect." Inevitably, even a sympathetic Westerner reacts to native peoples by drawing on a store of his own time-honored archetypes: the noble savage, the Faustian scientist.

On the other side of the ledger, we have Niuli, Ko'olau's sister, who is stricken early on and deported to the leper colony: she is "quiet serious affectionate." (Her ailment would presumably lose its moral implications if she were, say, "selfish frivolous mean.") In a bit of unwitting Orientalism, Merwin has Ko'olau "breath[ing] the day of the mule/with no age to it no story no reward": the natives are animal (in the best sense), void of burdens like time and history. Or, more generally, in a perfect statement of contemporary Western fantasy about pre-Columbian America:

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... in a land full of the lives of animals
 beaver in the streams bear in the forests
 wolves deer and moose
 their ways forming the fabric through
 which the colors
 and character of the human lives were
 continued
 season by season and in that wholeness
 remained whole
 believing that they might draw from the
 life around them
 from the senses and quickening of the
 animals
 what they truly needed and no more
 and that in return
 for their restraint and compunction
 the creatures around them
 who they knew were their elders and
 were spirits and powers
 would protect them from the evils of
 sickness and pestilence
 it was an understanding that sustained
 them until
 fishermen out of England came upon
 that coast...

It is impossible to take such an idyll seriously. Does Merwin not see that he is telling the story of the Garden of Eden, with the Englishmen in the role of serpent? Surely such a place never existed, not like this. Before the Westerners came, surely, Hawaii was the site of war and murder, starvation, scarcity, cruelty, at least from time to time. By flattening truth into myth, Merwin pushes his inherently powerful story into tendentiousness.

The problem, finally, is that Merwin, like most who espouse this view of the conquest of America as Original Sin, does not come to terms with the full implications of it. Indeed, as a native of New York, raised in Union City and Scranton, who is resident in Maui, Merwin should be especially aware of what is entailed by his demonizing of the white "discoverers." It is not a question of whether the conquest of the New World was kind, pleasant, or even just; it was none of these things. But what does it mean to apply such a standard of judgment to such an event? The Macedonian destruction of Greece or the Arab conquest of the Middle East was no more just; but we would think it absurd to denounce those events, and with good reason. All movement whatsoever of peoples and ideas has been bound up with violence. Incommensurable interests are in constant conflict; and the fact that some prevail, while others are destroyed, is tragic in the fullest sense of the word. But Merwin has turned a historical tragedy into a morality play, with heroes and villains neatly tagged. Our sympathies, which would be given freely to a set of free and actual characters, rebel

against Merwin's pantomime of good and evil.

In *The River Sound*, Merwin leaves behind public history, and the style in which he told that history, and takes up his own past. These are poems of retrospect and summing up, as the poet—"The year I will be seventy/who never could believe my age"—looks back on his life and the places in which he has lived it. The heart of the book is in two of the poems of its middle section, "Lament for the Makers" and especially "Testimony," the latter running to some two hundred stanzas. Bracketing that middle section are two groups of smaller and more casual poems:

There are threads of old sound heard
 over and over
 phrases of Shakespeare or Mozart the
 slender
 wands of the auroras playing out from
 them
 into dark time the passing of a few
 migrants high in the night far from
 the ancient flocks
 far from the rest of the words far from
 the instruments

That is the entirety of "Remembering," and it is characteristic of the short poems in this volume: again unpunctuated, adding phrase upon phrase, vague in imagery ("wands of the auroras"), and seemingly unpremeditated, like a sigh. Other poems recall places that Merwin has lived in or visited, always with the consciousness of time weighing heavily on him:

Now I see it after years of holding
 reflections of parts of it in my mind
 children have been born here and have
 grown up
 married gone off to war divorced and died
 since the last time I stood on these same
 stones....

Taken together, these smaller poems seem like a notebook or a laboratory for the central poems in the volume, especially "Testimony," which again takes up the theme of time past and passing.

What is most striking about "Testimony," "Lament for the Makers," and a few of the other poems in *The River Sound* is that they are written in fairly strict forms. Merwin's wrestle with those forms is curious, since he seems ill at ease with them. Only "Testimony," in its best passages, achieves the automatic, unstraining movement that form should provide. "Testimony" is a poem after Villon's "The Legacy," written in Villon's form and with the same conceit of bequeathing things to the poet's friends. Unlike Villon, though, Merwin devotes the first half of his poem to a recitation

of his family history, documenting, with a raw emotional force, the many deaths and losses that shaped his mother's life:

those were her deaths before my day
 by that time she could turn to hear
 outside the voices on her way
 a stillness only partly here
 and whatever she would hold dear
 giving herself up to its care
 she looked beyond it without fear
 toward what she felt was waiting there

After the long and affecting saga of his mother's and father's hardships, Merwin turns to a memory of himself as a boy, reading Villon for the first time. He then begins the catalogue proper of the things he will leave behind; not, like Villon, sarcastic and high-spirited, but melancholic and affectionate:

and evening on Washington Square
 Margaret home her door opening
 and John and Aleksandra there
 dinner all together talking
 over last plans for their wedding
 guests flowers music clothes with less
 than two days to spend rehearsing
 the program and its promises

besides that to be practical
 I leave them now for future use
 something that both of them know well
 the long light on the avenues
 Fifth or Seventh or they may choose
 when the moment occurs to them
 early or late a day like this
 in spring or a day in autumn....

Later on, Merwin turns to other poets and literary figures: Galway Kinnell, Gerald Stern, and many others make cameo appearances.

One problem with such a list is that it runs the risk of becoming coterie poetry: those who do not know Merwin and his circle are left on the outside, overhearing their shared memories. To be sure, Villon also made a list of his friends. Yet Villon's comedy, and above all his avoidance of personal reminiscence, allow for a kind of energy that is immediately attractive even to strangers:

Item: to help said Master Robert
 gain some sort of livelihood
 (for God's sake don't be envious),
 my parents are to sell my coat of mail,
 and, before Easter, use the money,
 or at least the better part of it,
 to buy this simpleton a stall
 near Saint-Jacques.

But there is also a larger problem with Merwin's poem. It concerns his handling of the difficult, constraining form that he has chosen. Whether intentionally or not, Merwin's tetrameter stanzas are uneven, jangly, the lines often short

or long, the rhymes sometimes forced or merely notional:

I am the child still listening

who from a farmhouse once in spring
walked out in the long day alone
through old apple orchards climbing
to a hilltop where he looked down
into a green valley that shone
with such light all the words were poor
later to tell what he had known
they said that was the night pasture....

The mixed masculine/feminine endings (spring/climbing, poor/pasture) mean that we often do not hear the rhyme, even if we can see that it is there. While most of the lines contain eight syllables, they are not in a consistent meter: to try to say the line "to a hilltop where he looked down" in the same pattern as "they said that was the night pasture" makes nonsense of the words' natural stresses.

Still, despite the looseness, Merwin still seems to be padding to fill out his measures: "once" in the first line, "long" in the second, "all" in the sixth, and possibly other words and phrases as well, add nothing substantial to the sense. They remind one of the use of words such as "eke" in pre-Elizabethan poetry to fill a line. (Hence the expression "to eke out.") Indeed, the poet who Merwin most resembles at such moments is John Gower, the fourteenth-century poet, who wrote at a time when English rhyme and meter were still immature. Here is a stanza from "Testimony":

when had she first felt that was so
her father died when she was four
from then on she would never know
what she knew of him any more
was it he she had seen before
and his eyes with the day inside
going away already or
was all that after he had died

And here are some lines from Gower's "Confessio Amantis," written six hundred years ago, in the 1390s:

There was a real noble king
And riche of alle worldes thing
Which of his propre onheritance
Athenes hadde in governance,
And who-so theken therupon
His name was king Pandion.
Two doughtres hadde he be his wif
The whiche he lovede as his lif;
The ferste doughter Progne hihte
And the secounde, as sche wel mihte,
Was cleped faire Philomene....

Like Gower's, Merwin's tetrameter is bouncily monotonous. Both resort to awkward or unnecessary constructions ("what she knew of him any more"; "and the secounde, as sche wel mihte").

In "Testimony," Merwin's human pathos keeps the reader's interest even when the verse does not; and there are several fine passages. But in the other formal poems here—especially "Lament for the Makers," an elegy for poets Merwin has known—the form detracts so much that the poem is spoiled:

that was the time that gathered Frost
into the dark where he was lost
to us but from too far to see
his voice keeps coming back to me....

Lowell thought the shadow skyline
coming toward him was Manhattan
but it blacked out in the taxi
once he read his *Notebook* to me....

With such a constrained form—further straitened by Merwin's decision to use "me" as the last word of each stanza—the poet can only succeed by giving each epigraph an epigrammatic clarity and force; but here the descriptions are desultory, and they do not make up for the clipped, perfunctory rhythm of the meter.

For Merwin, appropriately, is at his best when telling stories. His tale of Hawaiian fugitives and his personal reminiscences are genuinely affecting; but they have their effect not because of his style, but despite his style. Finally the fusion of language and subject, by which a poet's themes are revealed and determined through his language and its forms, is not attained. It is Merwin's matter, and not his manner, that prevails. •

TRB *continued from page 4*

25 and under from FICA. This targeted approach would cost the government at most \$12.4 billion per year while giving youngsters who might otherwise get into trouble or go on welfare an incentive to seek jobs—and giving employers an extra incentive to hire them. Kremer notes that the government could recoup this relatively modest revenue loss with a slight increase in taxes on everybody else. But the government could also do nothing to recover the lost revenue. In a time of \$100 billion-plus surpluses, the trust fund could absorb such a modest cut.

If a bit unrealistic politically, this discussion nevertheless reminds us that, when Democrats say, "Save Social Security first," they don't quite mean that literally. What they really mean is, "Save Social Security's tax and benefit structure as it currently exists first." Even in these flush economic times, the party lacks the political courage to tell the public that the program's solvency could be assured—and its overall fairness and efficiency enhanced—through tweaks in

current tax and benefit levels. The only catch is that the public would have to be forthrightly asked to accept some small sacrifices. Instead, we are being offered various complex plans to use projected budget surpluses, which may or may not materialize in the future, and which, if they do materialize, will already nominally belong to Social Security.

It says a lot about the Republicans that it has not even occurred to them to attack Clinton's plans for Social Security in these terms. They, too, are terrified of telling the public the truth that the current boom is the optimal time to accept a slight reduction in their current or expected benefits (which, for most people, far exceed the amount of money they paid into the program during their working careers) for the good of the program's future. And, of course, the idea of reforming the regressive FICA tax for the benefit, mostly, of lower-income workers is even more alien to the GOP. The party would rather push for some form of Social Security privatization (a limited version of which has also been floated by President Clinton), but voters don't seem to have kindled to that either.

One Republican says he cares for the non-rich. He is Patrick Buchanan. Buchanan has just declared his candidacy for the presidency, once again announcing that he is the tribune of the oppressed working classes, whom he urges to "mount up and ride to the sound of the guns." Last week he popped up in the papers next to a guy with a pitchfork. Why am I not reassured?

CHARLES LANE

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EL SALVADOR DIARIST

Peace of mind

IT'S A BRIGHT MORNING OUTSIDE San Salvador's teeming Central Market, and Nidia Díaz, a former urban guerrilla commander who is now the vice presidential candidate for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), is making a campaign speech to a hundred or so cheering supporters. Her very name evokes her guerrilla past—Nidia Díaz is her old *nom de guerre*. Hardly anyone knows that her real name is Marta Valladares. But when Díaz speaks, she sounds like a Central American version of Hillary Clinton, rather than a former member of what was once the most radical faction of the erstwhile guerrilla front. "We don't talk only about rights," she tells the crowd. "The women of El Salvador also have responsibilities: responsibilities to our families, to our communities." It takes a *pueblo* to raise a child.

DÍAZ AND FMLN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE Facundo Guardado are running a distant second in the polls before El Salvador's March 7 elections, but they could still force a runoff. Listening to the FMLN's former guerrilla chiefs on the stump, it's striking how far one of Latin America's most powerful Marxist movements has gone in ditching its old dogmas—and how far El Salvador as a whole has come in ending homicide as its main method of political expression. Seven years after the historic peace accord that ended a twelve-year civil war, a political culture of violence has given way to a campaign culture that is almost reassuringly humdrum. "I've had people, foreign people, tell me that, if I want to win this election, we must go around saying, 'The country's problems have to be solved our way, or the country will see a social convulsion. War will return.' I refuse to talk that way," Guardado told me. Indeed, the guerrilla-army-turned-party now supports the selling off of state enterprises and a free trade agreement with the United States. It accepts, with some reservations, the almost wholesale privatization of El Salvador's social security system. Guardado wants to spend more on education and social programs but also says crime must be

defeated "if we are ever to win more foreign investment."

THE FRONT-RUNNING PARTY, THE Republican Nationalist Alliance, known by its Spanish initials ARENA, began life as the anti-Communist creation of death-squad founder and cashiered army major Roberto D'Aubuisson. Seemingly less burdened by its past than the ex-guerrillas, the party has won the last two presidential elections, and it is probably headed for a third victory behind its current candidate, Francisco Flores, a 39-year-old Harvard-educated academic. Still, like the FMLN, ARENA has been obliged to distance itself from its unsavory past. You seldom hear the ARENA Party anthem, which says El Salvador "will be the tomb of the reds." Flores has moved his campaign offices away from the ARENA headquarters, site of a huge bronze statue of D'Aubuisson. Confident of victory, Flores has run a substance-free campaign and has declined to attack the opposition. "My adversary isn't the FMLN anymore. It's the poverty and insecurity that Salvadorans face," he told me. The candidates are being so civil to each other that one newspaper caricature showed them arguing over a restaurant check: "No let *me* pay," says Flores. "No please, I insist," says Guardado.

FOR ALL THE NEW POLITESSE IN the political realm, however, El Salvador remains a very rough place. There were 23 murders a day during 1997 (compared with two a day in New York City, which has a somewhat larger population). This was, perhaps, to be expected in a country with so many out-of-work paramilitaries and guerrillas, but the problem has been aggravated by the spread of a Los Angeles-style gang culture, complete with high-powered guns and spray-painted shrines for fallen gang members in San Salvador's eastern barrios. Thirty percent of rural Salvadorans live in what the government calls "extreme poverty," which means practically no income and no running water or electricity. And politics-as-usual brings the usual voter apathy. Voter participation has sunk to levels close to our own.

BUT SOMETHING REAL HAS changed. "The rules of the game are clear now. The lesson of war was that, if you resort to force, it turns out badly," a former Central Bank president told me. If the left ever were elected, "the elite

would have to accept it. There's no question about that," he says. Much of the credit goes to the 1992 peace agreement, a flexible deal that gives all parties equal access to the political system with no taboos or proscriptions. The most unexpected consequence of the peace was to create a tacit entente between the FMLN and the downsized Salvadoran army—an understanding that makes any kind of military backsliding on the agreement even more remote. Local media reported that, after the 1997 elections, in which the FMLN won the mayoralty of San Salvador and almost as many National Assembly seats as ARENA, a



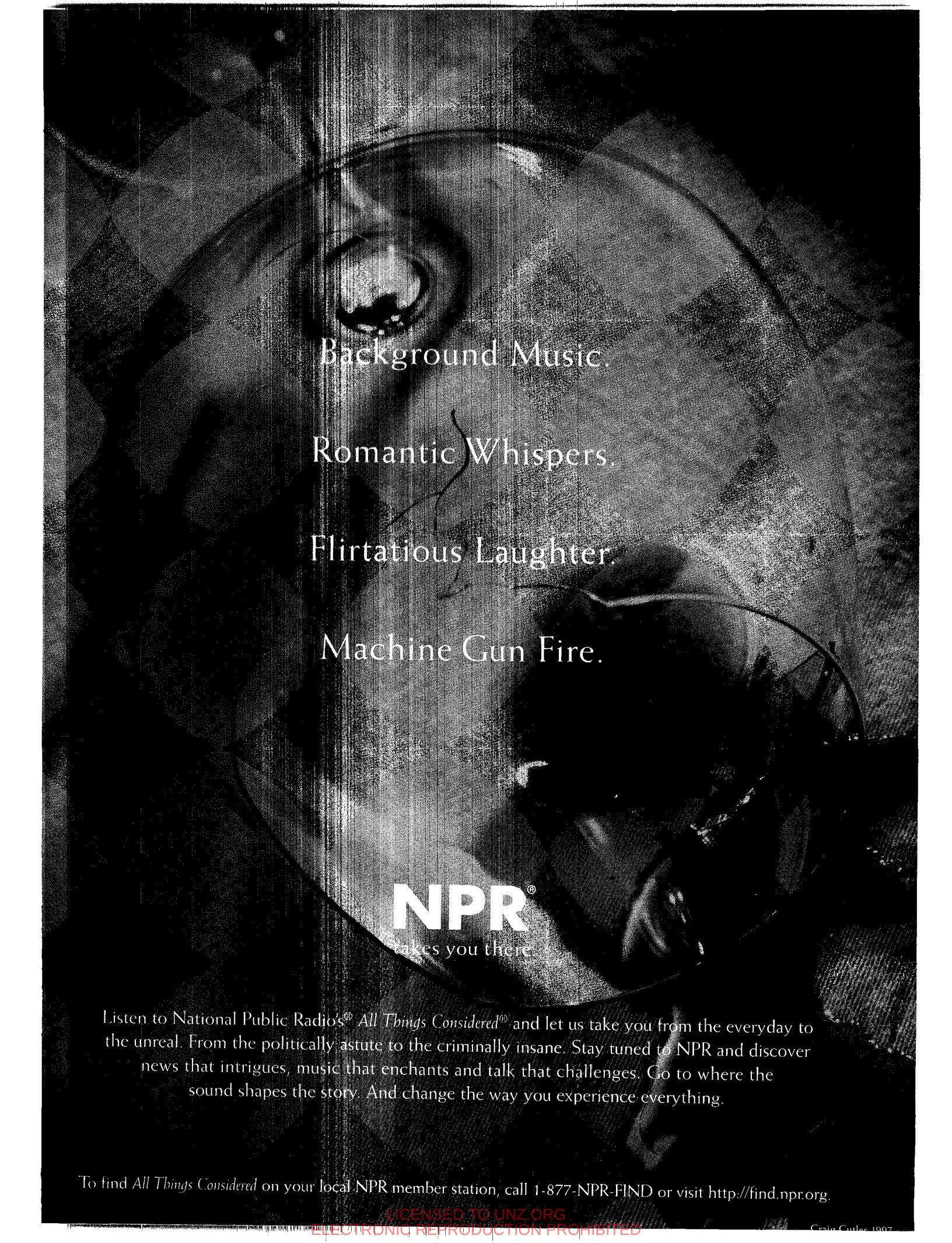
group of rightists approached the army to float the idea of a coup. The army refused. Over New Year's, when the army chafed at some of President Armando Calderón Sol's year-end officer promotions, sparking a brief disciplinary crisis, the FMLN publicly sided with the army. "There are some figures we are not so sure about," an FMLN official told me.

"But the army as an institution would accept a government by us. We know that. There is trust between us."

WHEN PRESIDENT CLINTON arrives in Central America the day after the Salvadoran elections, he will find a region that has been devastated by Hurricane Mitch but that is also enjoying an unprecedented degree of political pluralism and that is at least going through the motions of healing its cold war wounds. In Guatemala, President Alvaro Arzú has apologized for the government's role in the 36 years of civil war in which 140,000 died. "In the name of the state, I ask forgiveness," he said. In El Salvador, political convulsions have twice in this century resulted in the death of more than one percent of the country's population—first in 1932, with the repression of a Communist-led rural revolt, and then in the 1980–1992 civil war, in which 75,000 people died. This is the kind of history no one wants to repeat. During the war, the mountain town of Suchitoto was desolate and bombed-out. Today it has been reborn as a Bohemian retreat of sorts, a pleasant village where rich Salvadorans and diplomats come to relax. On my visit, a local man told me: "War brought out the animal in us." He could well have added: Peace brought out the politician.

ROGER ATWOOD

ROGER ATWOOD is a reporter for Reuters.



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